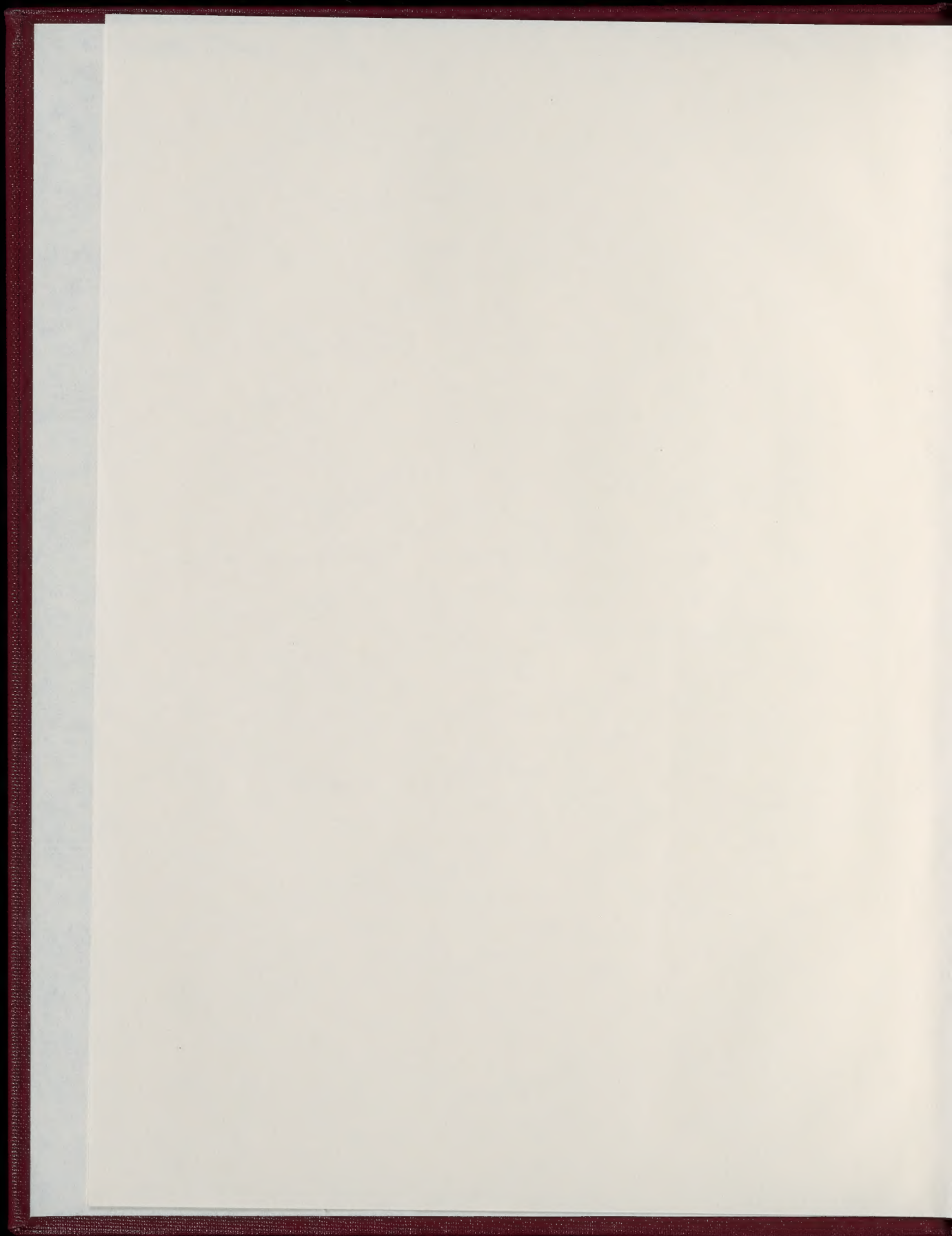


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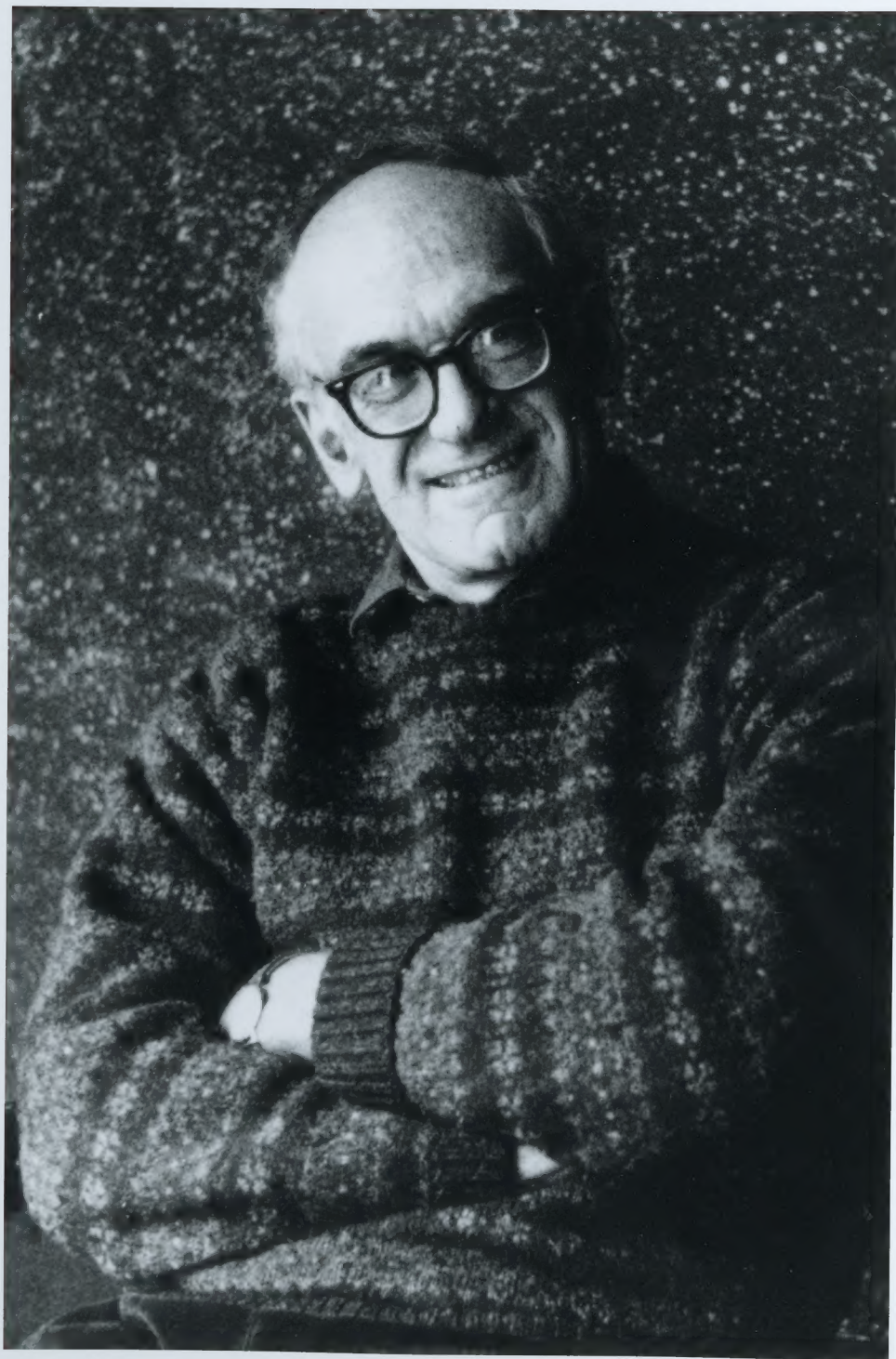












ART HISTORIAN

James S. Ackerman

Interviewed by Joel Gardner

Art History Oral Documentation Project

Completed under the auspices
of the
Oral History Program
University of California
Los Angeles
and the
Getty Center for the History of
Art and the Humanities

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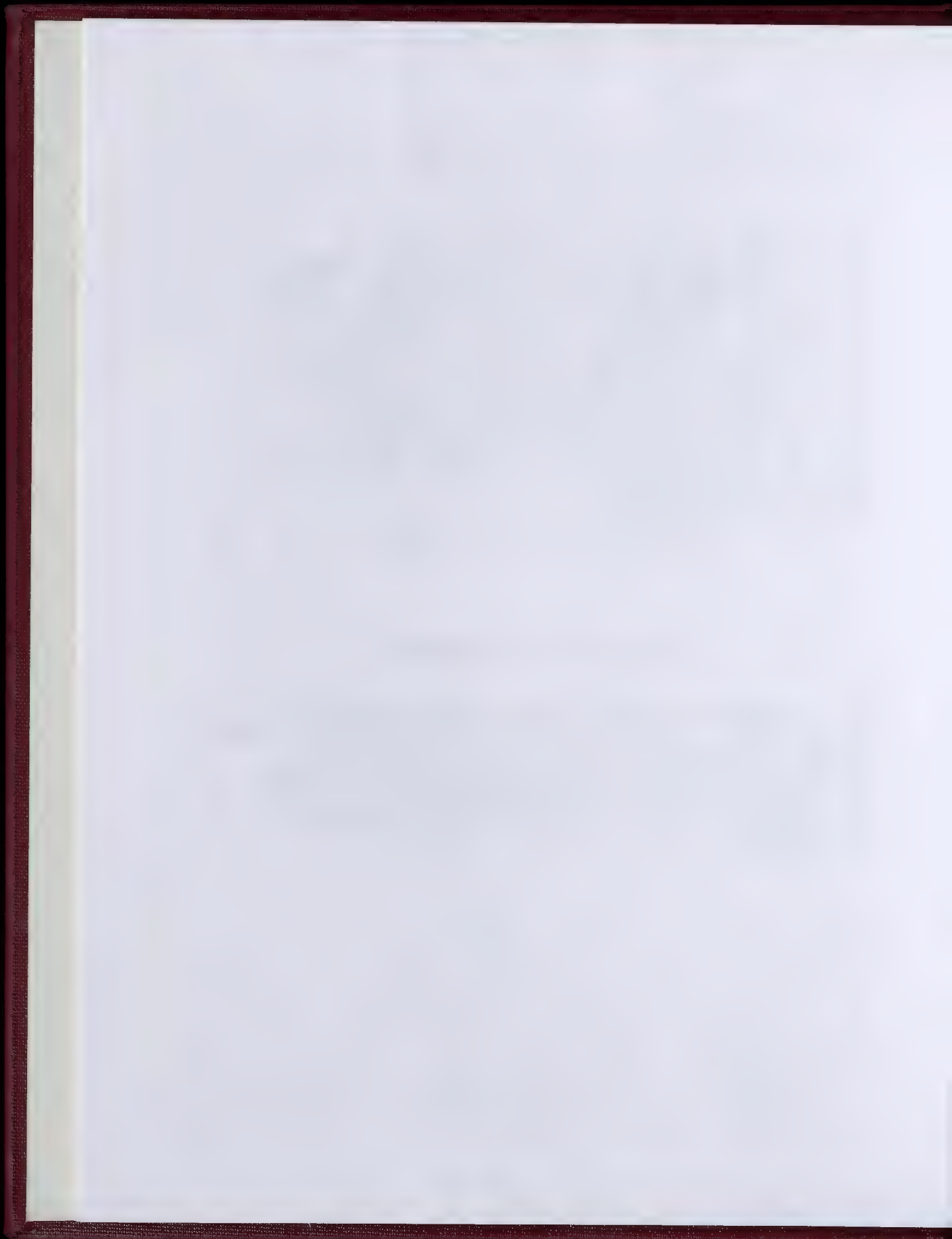
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RESTRICTIONS ON THIS INTERVIEW

None.

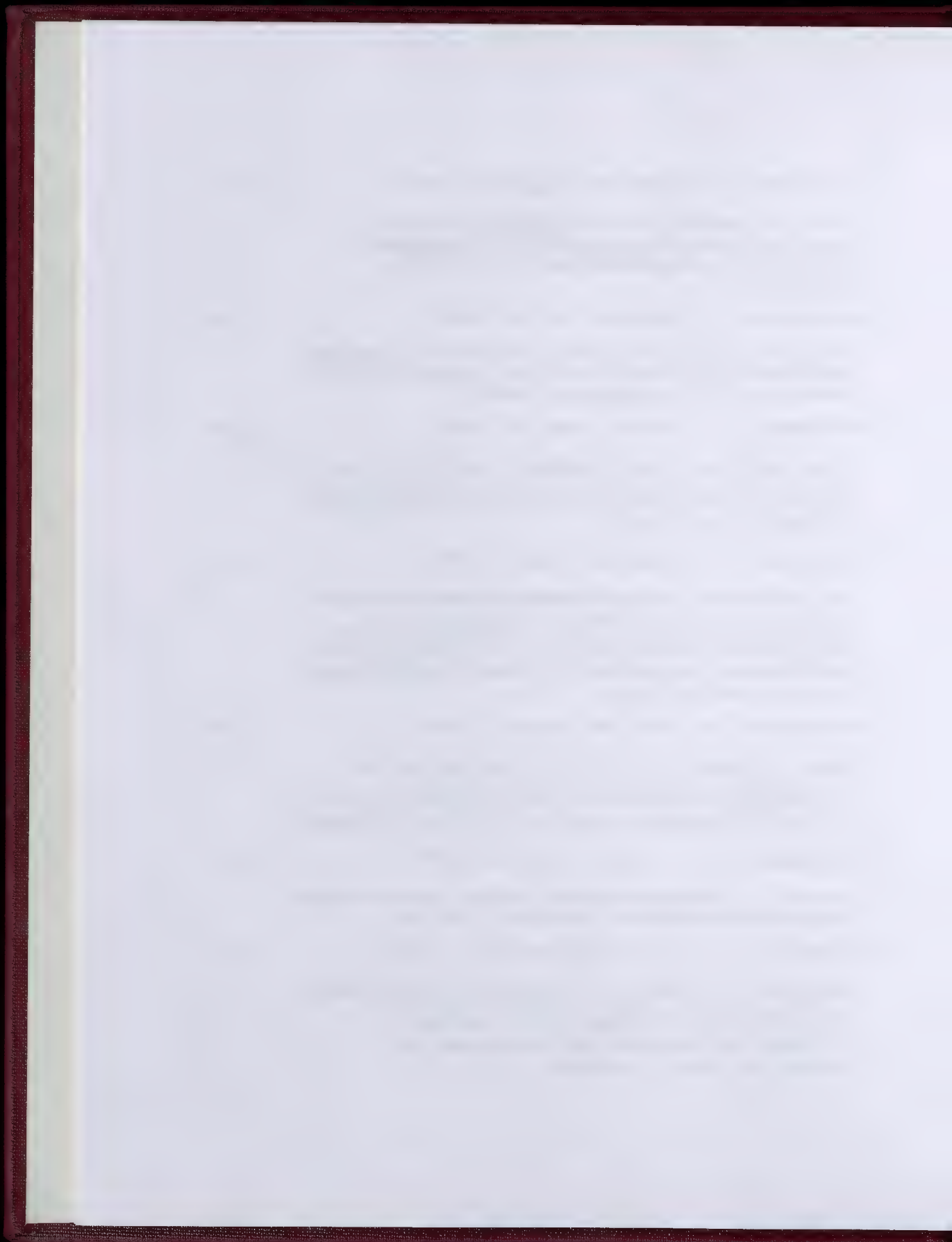
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BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY

PERSONAL HISTORY:

Born: November 8, 1919, San Francisco, California.

Education: A.B., 1941, Yale University; M.A., 1947, Ph.D., 1952, Institute of Fine Arts, New York University.

Spouse: Mildred Rosenbaum Ackerman, married 1947, three children, died 1986; Jill Slosburg-Ackerman, married 1987, one child.

CAREER HISTORY:

Part-time lecturer, Yale University, 1946, 1949.

Research fellow, American Academy in Rome, 1949-52.

Assistant professor, University of California, Berkeley, 1952-59; professor, 1959-60.

Professor, fine arts, Harvard University, 1960-84; chair, Department of Fine Arts, 1963-68, 1982-84; Arthur Kingsley Porter professor, 1984-90; professor emeritus, 1990-present.

Visiting fellow, Council of the Humanities, Princeton University, 1960-61.

Slade professor, Cambridge University, 1969-70.

Meyer Schapiro professor, Columbia University, 1988; visiting professor, 1991.

Visiting professor, Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, 1992.

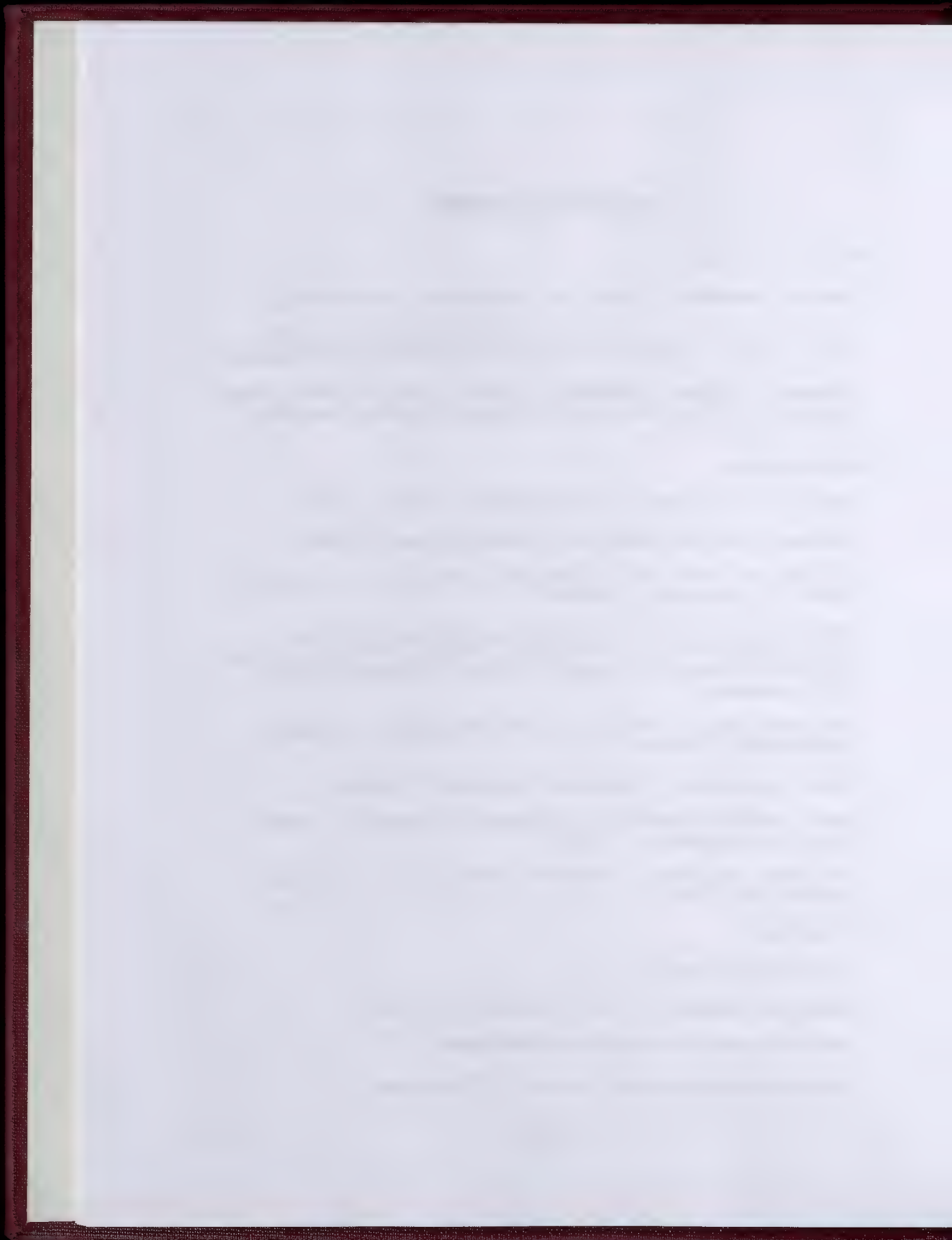
AFFILIATIONS:

Accademia Olimpica.

American Academy in Rome, trustee, 1967-84.

American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Annali d'architettura, editor, 1991-present.



Art Bulletin, editor in chief, 1956-60.

Artists Foundation, trustee, 1977-87; president, 1977-79.

Ateneo Veneto.

British Academy.

College Art Association of America.

Council of Scholars, Library of Congress, 1980-82.

Renaissance Society of America.

Royal Academy of Arts and Sciences, Uppsala.

Royal Society for Encouragement of Arts.

Society of Architectural Historians.

University Film Study Center, president, 1967-68.

HONORS AND AWARDS:

Honorary doctorate, Kenyon College, 1961.

Medal of Distinguished Service to Art Education, National Gallery of Art, 1966.

University of California Centennial Citation, 1968.

Honorary doctorate, Maryland Institute of Fine Arts, 1972.

Fellow, National Endowment for the Humanities, 1974-75.

Honorary doctorate, University of Maryland, 1976.

Honorary doctorate, Massachusetts College of Art, 1984.

Honorary doctorate, University of Venice, 1985.

Mellon lecturer, National Gallery of Art, 1985.

Institute honors, American Institute of Architects, 1987.

Gold medal, Istituto per la Storia dell'Arte Lombarda, 1987.



Distinguished teaching award, College Art Association of America, 1989.

BOOKS:

The Cortile del Belvedere. Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1954.

The Architecture of Michelangelo. London: Zwemmer, 1961. Second edition, 1986.

Art and Archaeology. With Rhys Carpenter. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1963.

Palladio. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966. Second edition, 1983.

Palladio's Villas. Locust Valley, New York: published for the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, by J. J. Augustin, 1967.

The Villa: Form and Ideology of Country Houses. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990.

Distance Points: Essays in Theory and Renaissance Art and Architecture. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1991.

SELECTED FILMS:

Looking for Renaissance Rome (with John Terry and Kathleen Weil-Garris Brandt), 1976.

Palladio: The Architect and His Influence in America (with John Terry), 1980.



INTERVIEW HISTORY

INTERVIEWER:

Joel Gardner, Oral Historian, Gardner and Associates.
B.A., M.S., French, Tulane University; M.A., Journalism,
UCLA.

TIME AND SETTING OF INTERVIEW:

Place: Tapes I-XI, Ackerman's apartment, New York City;
Tapes XII-XIII, Ackerman's home, Cambridge,
Massachusetts.

Dates, length of sessions: March 19, 1991 (90 minutes);
April 15, 1991 (90); April 22, 1991 (120); May 13, 1991
(75); May 22, 1991 (120); May 29, 1991 (110); June 12,
1991 (130); November 18, 1991 (125).

Total number of recorded hours: 14.35

Persons present during interview: Ackerman and Gardner.

CONDUCT OF INTERVIEW:

This is one in a series of interviews intended to examine the development of art history as a professional discipline and conducted under the joint auspices of the Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities and the UCLA Oral History Program.

In preparing for the interview, Gardner consulted with Richard Cándida Smith, the project director, about the goals and purpose of the project and possible lines of questioning. Gardner did background research by reviewing Ackerman's articles and books. Between taping sessions, Gardner and Smith surveyed the progress of the interview and modified the approach.

The interview is organized chronologically, beginning with Ackerman's childhood and family background and continuing through his education and career as an art historian and academic. Major topics include Ackerman's writings, the conflict between theoretical and historical approaches to art history, the effect of the 1960s on art history, and colleagues and policies in the Harvard University Department of Fine Arts.



EDITING:

Alex Cline, editor, edited the interview. He checked the verbatim transcript of the interview against the original recordings, edited for punctuation, paragraphing, and spelling, and verified proper names. Words and phrases inserted by the editor have been bracketed.

Ackerman reviewed the transcript. He verified proper names and made numerous corrections and additions.

David P. Gist, editor, and Janet Shiban, editorial assistant, prepared the table of contents. Gist prepared the biographical summary, Shiban drafted the interview history, and Lisa Magee, editorial assistant, compiled the index.

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS:

The original tape recordings of the interview are in the university archives and are available under the regulations governing the use of permanent noncurrent records of the university. Records relating to the interview are located in the office of the UCLA Oral History Program.



TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE ONE

MARCH 19, 1991

GARDNER: To begin with, as you see from the outline, I'd like to begin by talking about your family background and history. But first, one bookkeeping item I've got to remember to do is to have you give me your full name and your date and place of birth.

ACKERMAN: James Sloss Ackerman, and I was born in San Francisco on November 8, 1919.

GARDNER: Okay. Now I can go into the question and ask you to tell me something about your family background.

ACKERMAN: My family were Californian on both sides. My father [Lloyd S. Ackerman] was born in New York, but his father had been born in California in 1854 and spent some time there and then returned East. My mother [Louise Sloss Ackerman]'s family went back all the way. Her grandfather [Louis Sloss] was a refugee from the German revolution of 1848. He came to America alone as a young man of twenty-five, and when he arrived he kept on going and went to Saint Joseph, Missouri, and bought a horse and rode to California. This was in 1849. It was the gold rush period. He and his two transcontinental companions started work selling equipment and horses to miners, which seemed to be a lot more solid kind of activity than the mining itself, because you could even sell to unsuccessful



miners. [laughter] But the same year they were wiped out by floods, and shortly Louis entered a new partnership to open a general store. They prospered but were again washed away and moved to San Francisco in 1861 and, after a while as merchants, founded a shipping line to Alaska in January 1868. It was called the Alaska Commercial Company. It was influential in the opening of Alaska and very successful, and they became wealthy.

GARDNER: These would be the Slosses?

ACKERMAN: The Slosses. Louis traveled to Philadelphia on business and found a wife; his partner, Lewis Gerstle, followed him later to propose to Mrs. Sloss's sister. They traveled across Nicaragua before the canal and up by boat.

GARDNER: How interesting.

ACKERMAN: They were apparently successful. [laughter]

GARDNER: How would they--? Well, it's such distant knowledge that it's not fair for me to ask you in an oral history. How would they have found the sisters?

ACKERMAN: Well, just through members of the same community from which they came.

GARDNER: I see.

ACKERMAN: Now, needless to say, they were German Jews who belonged to a very tight-knit community, and I think that there were many links. People who were later associated in California had similar backgrounds.



GARDNER: Where in Germany were they from?

ACKERMAN: Unterreisenheim in Bavaria. My sister [Anne Ackerman Finnie] is much better at family history. But this history is important for the family position, because in California being a forty-niner, a pioneer, had such status that it almost overcame being Jewish. But that almost was very important, so that this circle of very well-off and well-educated German Jews integrated and yet not. That is, they had access to many institutions and places that Russian Jews would not have had and that the Jews coming later in the century would not, and yet they never knew when the limits would begin to be significant. My father was obsessed with this. He wanted to be as gentile as he could, and he was always extremely sensitive about it, so that it was a major psychological element in my upbringing. They had long since lost their religious underpinning, so that they didn't have any compensation for feeling exposed in this way.

GARDNER: In many cities--Philadelphia is an example, Los Angeles is an example--Jews were involved in the major clubs in the cities at the end of the nineteenth century, beginning of the twentieth, and then that was rescinded. Did that happen, to your knowledge, to any of the--?

ACKERMAN: No, I don't think in clubs. My father was funny in this respect. All his life he had wished to be a



member of the Union Club, a fancy club on Nob Hill which I think was in Hollis Huntington's old mansion. And then, when he was really well on in years, he was asked if he'd be interested in joining and refused. [laughter]

GARDNER: That's irony.

ACKERMAN: Yes. Clubs were a problem. He was a member of the Olympic Golf Club--he was a fairly good golfer--and he couldn't get my brother [Lloyd S. Ackerman, Jr.] in when he tried. So that was the kind of thing that always set him on edge.

GARDNER: Sure.

ACKERMAN: I certainly would have dealt with that situation in a very different way.

GARDNER: How did the Ackermans get to California?

ACKERMAN: That's fairly obscure. They were a very tight-knit and large family and did everything together, and they lived together. My father, in his boyhood, grew up in a house which had three or four families in it. There must have been twenty-five people at the table at every meal. The Slosses didn't consider the Ackermans to be quite up to their level. They were opposed to the marriage to some degree, and there was always friction. My grandfather [J. H. Ackerman] had considerable success initiating a chain of stores of the kind that Schrafft's used to be, for sweets and afternoon tea. In the days



before women could drink or smoke in public, this was an important social option. The chain was called Pig and Whistle. My grandfather wanted to give it cultural tone and bought paintings, large, heavily framed European paintings, which I guess he bought by the lot and hung in the ice cream parlors. He himself was not a very cultivated person (he entered his father's business at fifteen or sixteen), but he saw cultivation as being good business. At any rate, these two families also differed with respect to their pioneer status. As the Ackermans had come in the fifties, they had no claim to particular recognition. And my immediate family-- I would guess that they contributed to the Reform temple but didn't participate.

GARDNER: How did your parents meet? Do you have any idea?

ACKERMAN: I think just in the very formalized social situation where parties would be held. In those days, no young lady would ever meet a young man without being accompanied. It was very strict. And I think that my father was probably social climbing in his alliance to my mother. I don't think it was much of a love affair. At any rate, it worked out.

GARDNER: Now, your father was a lawyer. Where was he educated?



ACKERMAN: He got his bachelor's at Stanford [University], and I think he probably went for a year or so to Stanford law [school] and then transferred to Yale [University]. He referred to himself as a Yale person. That's how I happened to go there, because that was the only place he wanted to acknowledge.

GARDNER: Had your mother gone to college as well?

ACKERMAN: No. She went to a finishing school.

GARDNER: Which was more appropriate, I suppose, in those days.

ACKERMAN: Oh, only very exceptional women got a college education in that group. She was nineteen when they married, I think.

My father had a superficially good education. He read classic novels--not in his mature years so much--and he was very concerned for his children's education. He overdid it. I mean, he sent my brother to Oxford [University] or Cambridge [University]--Oxford I think it was--for a couple of years after college, which was not particularly suited to my brother, who wasn't a good student, but who was very pliable. And [he sent] my sister to the Sorbonne. These were just ideas he had of what was the proper thing to do with a child. But then when I went to graduate school for serious, he wasn't too happy because he wanted me to be a lawyer. First he



wanted my brother to be a lawyer and carry on. My brother really wasn't the type. And then he hoped, without much hope, that I would too, though I never showed much inclination in that direction. Being very materialistic the way my grandfather was, he thought that a person's value in a society was measured by earnings. And when I decided that I was going to prepare to be a professor, he counted that pretty low. Of course, in recompense terms, it would be hard to get lower at that period. My starting salary was \$5,500. But twelve years before when I planned to become a professor, it was probably down in the \$2,000s. [laughter]

GARDNER: Let me back you up and have you give the roster of your family: your brother and sister, when they were born, when you were born, and so on.

ACKERMAN: My brother was born in 1909 and died in '45 in the Burma campaign, World War II. He had a son [Lloyd S. Ackerman III] before he went overseas. Then my sister was born in 1910 or '11, and she still lives out in the Bay Area.

GARDNER: Names?

ACKERMAN: Her name is Anne Finnie, and my brother's name was Lloyd, Jr; my father's name was Lloyd Stuart to sound non-Jewish. And my sister had four children by an earlier marriage and now has a number of



grandchildren.

GARDNER: So you were the baby of the family, then.

ACKERMAN: Yes, I came much later. My mother got sick when I was very small and I was somewhat shunted off, which may have induced me to read books. I don't know.

I was saying about my father's interest in his children's education-- He also took us abroad. My grandmother did also. Let me see. How many times did I go? Well, the two times that I can recall are-- When I was about twelve or thirteen and my brother graduated from college. To celebrate this occasion, we went on a grand tour of Europe. This was 1932 or '33. The Depression had just hit. And my father used up the money that he'd saved for my brother's education on a trip which he insisted on doing all first-class and fancy. On two occasions, then, we traveled by air from London to Paris and Vienna to Venice. I believe that commercial air travel was no more than a year or two old.

GARDNER: That's right.

ACKERMAN: Lindbergh's flight was 1928, I think, so we were pioneer air travelers.

GARDNER: Well, it must have been an enormous haul to get to Europe from San Francisco, too.

ACKERMAN: Yes.

GARDNER: It's a grand, grand tour at that point to



undertake that.

ACKERMAN: Across the country by train and then boat and-- Well, it was a big deal. But anyway, on that occasion and later, my father felt that it was his responsibility to have us absorb culture, and he took us to museums and very bravely undertook to tell us what we were looking at, which he didn't know himself. So I got my first exposure to the visual arts in this way. We went through all the major capitals of Europe.

GARDNER: Do you recall anything? Is there anything that really stands out for you from that time?

ACKERMAN: Everything I recall is strangely in the form of what you might call snapshots: single images from a given place. I don't know why it worked that way, but I just had these fixed visions. And they are quite clear, though very restricted, and they don't particularly have to do with art.

GARDNER: Well, what are they, just out of curiosity?

ACKERMAN: Oh, at London, a store window that had in it objects that fascinated me.

GARDNER: How interesting.

ACKERMAN: In Rome, just the view out the hotel window onto the piazza below. One was curious because of a later experience. We went to a spa, Carlsbad, right over the border from Germany into Czechoslovakia. About



four years ago, when I went to visit my son [Anthony Ackerman] in Czechoslovakia--he's been living there--we went to this town, which was in very battered condition after all these years and the past government, and I tried to identify that image that I had. No go. [laughter] I couldn't. It had changed so much, too. But anyway, that introduction to another civilization I think was probably important for me. When I was fifteen, my grandmother took us on a Baltic tour that touched on all the Scandinavian countries and Russia. We went to Leningrad and Moscow.

GARDNER: How interesting.

ACKERMAN: It was a cruise on the Swedish line.

GARDNER: Which grandmother? Ackerman?

ACKERMAN: Oh, [Bertha Greenbaum] Sloss. She was the matriarch of the family, and all the difficulties, including my mother's illness, I think came from her iron fist and my father's not very yielding response to it. But he yielded to the extent that, in 1927, we moved out of an apartment in San Francisco-- It was an apartment where my grandmother lived in a separate unit, but it was attached. And on the other side was my aunt and uncle, so my grandmother really knew how to keep things together. Anyway, she usually provided for the summers. She would, for the most part, rent mansions down the peninsula from San Francisco that people would let for the summer. My



father would come, I guess, for long weekends or something like that. He never managed to get my mother away from her mother.

GARDNER: Who went on the Scandinavian cruise?

ACKERMAN: Just myself and my parents and my grandmother.

GARDNER: I see. Did you get to visit the various cultural sights of those states when you visited them?

Did you go to the Hermitage, for example?

ACKERMAN: Well, we did the usual things. So the general picture of this family situation is a very privileged one and one in which humanistic culture was held in high regard, though not necessarily practiced. We didn't discuss books at the dinner table and that sort of thing.

GARDNER: What did you discuss at the dinner table?

ACKERMAN: I don't know. The problems of being Jewish.

[laughter] I can't remember very well.

GARDNER: Where in San Francisco did you live? What parts of town?

ACKERMAN: Right next to the Presidio in Pacific Heights--also a very privileged spot. The library of the new house had a view which looked out to the Pacific Ocean, past the Golden Gate Bridge, and swept the entire bay over to Alcatraz Island and beyond to the campanile of the University [of California] in Berkeley. It was just breathtaking. And the Palace of Fine Arts was just below.



So it was a wonderful spot. I always had a feeling of guilt about the privilege. I can't quite figure out how I got to be socially conscious, because it wouldn't have come out of the family. I was on the other side of the bar there with respect to my feelings about society, my politics, and my consciousness of minorities and the like.

GARDNER: You had that even growing up?

ACKERMAN: Yes. And I don't know where it could have come from.

GARDNER: Well, tell me about your schooling. When were you packed off to school? And what was--?

ACKERMAN: Yes, quite early. After this European trip, I guess, at thirteen.

GARDNER: Well, what about elementary schools, now?

ACKERMAN: A few years at a local public school, and then a private school in San Francisco.

GARDNER: Which one?

ACKERMAN: Well, it was called Potter [School] when I went, and then the headmaster changed and it became Damon [School]. It later became well known after I left. One of my teachers became the headmaster and called it the Town School. Then it moved to a building that had been built for it, and it became very posh. At the time I went there, I don't remember it as being especially elitist. It was adequate. I got decent schooling.



I went back and forth from school on cable cars of the generation that preceded the ones that have been maintained recently. There were two of these cars linked together. The front one was the grip car. It had seats along the side as the present one does. The cab car behind was enclosed with a back platform, a very picturesque thing. It ran along Pacific Avenue and went from a few blocks from my house down past school.

I went from there to prep school, south of Santa Barbara, called the Cate School. That was, at the time, a very outdoorsy school where every student had a horse, and we went off on weekends camping in the mountains, almost in the wilderness. Or we'd go down to the seashore and go into the surf with the horses. It wasn't the fancy kind of horse. Everybody had a kind of old workhorse for the trails. I remember mine cost sixty dollars. Then to take care of the horse, we'd be rooted out at six in the morning to clean out the corral, curry and feed the horse, then come back, take a shower, and go to school. It had a western character. But at night we had to get dressed up very fancy in suits with shirts with starched collars, so that we would know that there was a life of culture as well as the life of the muscle.

GARDNER: That was such a fascinating introduction to the California of that era, in a sense, that odd combination



of ranch and city.

ACKERMAN: Yes, right. Well, the headmaster had a very British public-school notion of the thing, except for that California element. The dormitories were built so that there were essentially three walls in a room. Although there were French doors that would close, more or less, if there was a terrible storm, it was normal that you would be sleeping half out of doors. These were single rooms, and all of them looked out on the balcony. In my last years I had a room that looked right out to the sea. It was on a mesa, oh, about a thousand feet up that just looked out into the Pacific.

It was good all-around schooling. And I actually got an introduction to art history there. I had been interested in art on my own. My mother was very involved in art. From about the time I went to school she worked in the San Francisco Museum [of Modern Art] and helped them build the library there, which is now named after her. She was always a strong supporter of the museum, and at about the same time she started doing ceramics herself and did very individual work. In another era, in another situation, she would have been a full-time artist. Her work is extraordinarily individual. Some of her most interesting work was made by firing thin slabs of glazed tile and then breaking them up and making mosaics out of



them. She used them to make tables and wall hangings and the like. But they were really good, so that there was that much art in my background--

GARDNER: Did you sketch or anything like that?

ACKERMAN: Did I? Yes. At one point she brought a ceramist to the house and I had lessons. Some of it was fired. I did this along with one of my friends who was a member of our social group. And at school I took art all the way through oil painting and watercolor. And the art history I referred to-- The Carnegie Corporation had produced a packet of five hundred reproductions of works of art throughout history which came with a little handbook. The German teacher, who was a native German and had a certain knowledge of art history, took on a couple of us on occasional evenings. We went through the Carnegie stuff. So I had a modest amount of acquaintance and did some reading myself. The first book I read that really excited me was by Roger Fry--essays called Transformations--and that was maybe when I was fifteen or so. And I had another book about modern architecture by Sheldon Cheney, who wasn't much of a figure. This was a book in which modern architecture was presented in a pseudo-modern phase, really. Moderne, I would say.

GARDNER: Right, right.

ACKERMAN: But anyway, I was interested in architecture.



I still have a drawing that I made, an elevation for a school project, and it's knowledgeably art deco. So I had some acquaintance of what contemporary style was. I wanted to be an architect, and I went to college with the idea of preparing to be one. In my first year, I took art history and physics and math, and that was about the end of my ambitions because I was so bad at the physics and the math. Which actually wouldn't have mattered very much because 90 percent of the architects I've ever met can't add. The preparatory school-- Oh, incidentally, one very important thing, and very characteristic of my father, is that this was an Episcopal school.

GARDNER: I'm glad you mentioned that, because I was going to ask about that, about the nature of your schooling.

ACKERMAN: Yes. Chapel every morning. This was the only religious education I ever got. I never got any Jewish education.

GARDNER: Did the family attend synagogue at all? Was that--?

ACKERMAN: No, never, although they'd have a rabbi for a wedding or a funeral.

GARDNER: Were you bar mitzvahed?

ACKERMAN: No.

GARDNER: So it really was a very assimilationist lifestyle, and that's very interesting.



ACKERMAN: This was pretty confusing to me.

GARDNER: Did you ever have any repercussions about that, though, being a Jewish kid in an Episcopal school? Did anybody--?

ACKERMAN: I think the other kids couldn't believe there would be a Jewish kid there. [laughter] If I told them, they would have thought I was kidding. [laughter] The headmaster's wife was a Boston Brahmin who was a Unitarian, and she said to me, "Oh, well, you and I are allies here because we both believe in one God." Anyway, the school, I think, wouldn't have taken a Jewish applicant at other times, but this was the start of the Depression. They were hard up. My class had ten boys. Very small.

GARDNER: What about in the other schools you attended?

ACKERMAN: I was completely unconscious of anything. No other kids from the social circle that I can recall went there, except my brother had gone to the same primary school in San Francisco. I don't think there was any issue there.

GARDNER: You mentioned that German teacher. Were there teachers along the way who had any kind of influences on you?

ACKERMAN: The German teacher had influence only because he helped with the art history. I was most impressed, I



think, by the Latin teacher, partly because he was so effective. He was the only strict disciplinarian. The others weren't entirely lax, but they were kind of laissez-faire, and the Latin teacher, out of necessity, I suppose, had to make you toe the line.

GARDNER: Latin teachers always seem to be the ones to do that. [laughter]

ACKERMAN: Well, I later regretted that I hadn't gone on in Latin, because I used it all the way through my career with an inadequate foundation. Not that the schooling wasn't good, but it just wasn't long enough. And then I didn't get Greek, which I wish I'd had. But I didn't know I was going to be a scholar. All the way through college, until the end, I hadn't made that decision. I certainly could have prepared myself better both in school and college if I'd clearly envisioned my career aims. But at least through the first couple of years of college, I was studying for architecture.

GARDNER: Had your brother gone to Yale as well?

ACKERMAN: No, he went to Pomona [College].

GARDNER: Oh, how interesting. And your sister?

ACKERMAN: To Scripps [College].

GARDNER: Oh, so you were really, in that sense, fulfilling your father's alumni track in a very real way.

ACKERMAN: Well, it's interesting. One had a very



different picture of college ambitions then and now. My father talked up Yale, and I agreed. Not so much just because I followed anything he said--which is not true; I was always chafing under the bit--but Yale seemed okay to me. It had an architecture school, I knew I could go on in art history, so I didn't see any problem with Yale. And then two of my classmates were going there. But the interesting thing is that I made this decision and applied to Yale, period. No other place.

GARDNER: No place else.

ACKERMAN: And I got in. And Cate School was good enough so that I got advanced placement in history and in art history. And that art history was extremely important because I started out in upper division courses, with the result that by the time I was a junior I could go into graduate seminars. If it hadn't been for that preparation--though there wasn't much to it in school, it was enough at that time so that they permitted me to start out on the higher level--I would never have had an inspiration to choose art history as a vocation.

GARDNER: That's very interesting that, given the nature of the eastern establishments and how they work, they would have given credit for the California prep school. Now, you talked about the nature of Cate being an Episcopal school and so on. Yale, of the Ivy League



schools, was probably the least assimilationist, except for perhaps Dartmouth [College].

ACKERMAN: Princeton [University] would be the worst.

[laughter]



TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE TWO

MARCH 19, 1991

ACKERMAN: I'll go back to say that Yale had a 15 percent quota of Jews, and out of "consideration" for their incoming students, they saw to it that Jews roomed only with Jews. Of course, that meant nothing to me because I wasn't anything of a Jew, but, nonetheless, one of my freshman roommates is still a friend.

GARDNER: Who was that?

ACKERMAN: His name is Robert Lewin, and he became a television writer in Hollywood. And when I was out at the Getty Center [for the History of Art and the Humanities] a couple of years ago, we got together. Anyhow, another thing about Yale at that time that I only found out later, to my embarrassment, was that they had never tenured a Jewish professor.

GARDNER: Is that so?

ACKERMAN: Nineteen forty-six was the first instance. Pretty late. And the bias affected the clubs and all that and the societies.

GARDNER: Were you involved in the clubs at all?

ACKERMAN: No. I was in a senior club which was really created as a counterweight to the senior societies. It was open in the sense of having no secrets. It was indifferent as to origin. The need, really, for something

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CITY OF BOSTON

FROM THE FIRST SETTLEMENT
TO THE PRESENT TIME
BY
JOSEPH NEALE
OF THE BOSTON BAR
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BOSTON: PUBLISHED BY
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1805.

of association beyond the academic or the social was there, and I think it was a good thing that there was an opportunity for people to talk together seriously about their feelings about the world and to discuss issues. This club had in it a couple of the people who turned down the senior societies. One was the future president of Yale, Kingman Brewster. It was interesting with respect to the Jewish situation that one member of this club was anti-Semitic and very uncomfortable about there being, I think, three Jews in the group, and part of what we went over in our sessions together was the issue of assimilation. Now, I must say that the Jews who made the grade at Yale were not representative, either, because there were a great many who didn't. I mean, within the Jewish community there was a very distinct split, and in a club like this, it would be very improbable that a non-assimilating type of Jew would have been a member.

GARDNER: But would a non-assimilating type of Jew have gotten in in the first place?

ACKERMAN: To Yale?

GARDNER: Yes.

ACKERMAN: Oh, yes. The 15 percent were admitted on grounds of ability, and that brought in a very high proportion of New York high school graduates and people who in their time at Yale were never part of the scene, in

1. The first part of the document discusses the importance of maintaining accurate records of all transactions and activities. It emphasizes the need for transparency and accountability in financial reporting.

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part, perhaps, by a self-isolation, but in part just because it wouldn't have happened anyway. So it's funny. Yale had a consciousness of being liberal, and the ethos was liberal, but it didn't work out to that extent.

I mean a George Bush type of liberal.

GARDNER: Well, a type of liberal, that's an interesting word for him. He would have been at Yale at about the same time as you, wouldn't he have?

ACKERMAN: No. I'm seventy-one [years old], and he must be, I don't know, fifty-eight or something.

GARDNER: Oh, no. He's older than that. I thought he had started Yale before the war, but maybe not. That's neither here nor there. You mentioned your social consciousness and political consciousness and so on. Do you think that began during this era at Yale?

ACKERMAN: No, no. I remember--

GARDNER: It seems hard for me to picture--

ACKERMAN: I have a very vivid memory, for example, of Halloween, when, for some reason or other-- Oh, there was kind of a high jinks going on in the streets. My parents sent me out in my grandmother's limousine with the chauffeur, and I remember the mortification of this, my [sense of the] impropriety of it. And I was little, maybe eight years old, and I just died.

GARDNER: So you'd pop out of the limousine and go up to



the door, trick-or-treat, and then pop back in?

ACKERMAN: Well, I don't think I even got out. But just-- This feeling, it goes back a long way. So at college it wasn't affected one way or the other.

GARDNER: I see. I see.

ACKERMAN: I never was an activist in the sense of joining a political union or anything like that.

But the Yale education was solid enough. Not much-- It was like prep school. There weren't many people who really put it to us to extend ourselves. People were after the gentleman's C.

I got very turned on by a course in poetry criticism, which was my first experience with critical interpretation. I didn't know interpretation existed. Prep school really was a matter of learning the canon. Studying history in prep school was having a textbook and being able to account for what was in the textbook with maybe some supplemental readings. The idea that a poem could be picked apart--this was the era of the New Criticism--was new to me, and it was fresh in America. I was let in on a whole new intellectual world. It was the new world. It was wonderfully taught. And, incidentally, we had in the class two people who became distinguished American poets. One was Reed Whittemore, who is quite well known.



GARDNER: Who was the other?

ACKERMAN: His name was James Jesus Angleton. He ended up as a big shot in the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency]. I never could understand-- He'd been raised by Ezra Pound, and you would have thought that that in itself would have excluded him.

GARDNER: Who was the teacher? Do you recall?

ACKERMAN: The teacher was Andrew Wanning, and he didn't get tenure. He spent his later career at Bard [College]. Anyway, it was terrific, and aside from my introduction to art history through [Henri] Focillon, it was probably the most important experience I had.

And then there were other people who gave good lectures and made things interesting but, as far as learning and strict intellectual discipline, were not demanding.

GARDNER: So I guess, then, that the next moment in your life really is sitting down in Focillon's class--

ACKERMAN: Yeah.

GARDNER: --and deciding not to be an architect. Tell me about Focillon. He would have only recently come over from France at that point, the middle thirties.

ACKERMAN: Well, he wasn't regular. He came either alternate years or alternate semesters. He alternated with [Marcel] Aubert, and Aubert was nothing. I mean, he



was what he called a medieval archaeologist; with Aubert you learned what the formula was. But Focillon was a genius. He was, at that time, very old and very infirm, bent almost double, and had vision out of one side of one eye. He could only see a work of art by doing a tour through it with a little glass that he'd hold up to his eye and move around. What was so stirring to me was the way he articulated his response to works of art. This is particularly noticeable because-- One of the courses--these were graduate seminars--one of the courses was called L'an mille because it was about the impact of the millennium and millennial fears in Europe and how that affected the figuration of architecture. It didn't necessarily focus on great monuments. It was very specific. But the richness that he brought to it, which I think is conveyed in his writing, too-- In part, it was the extraordinary charge of his language. I'd never experienced that in a teacher. Well, Erwin Panofsky had a tremendous gift at verbalizing, but it was very cerebral. Focillon was poetic.

GARDNER: In English.

ACKERMAN: No.

GARDNER: Oh, all in French.

ACKERMAN: Yes. Thank God, because that poetry would have been lost. It also had to it the flavor of the best French



writing since [Jules] Michelet. It was a cultural artifact in itself, his language and the way he put it together. I struggled a lot with the language. I can't remember-- I think we had to give our reports in French, too. So that really put it to me with respect to discipline.

It's remarkable to me just psychologically, as I think back to my college days and my attitude towards work. I became a workaholic as a scholar, which, I think, is the only way that a person can achieve.

GARDNER: As a scholar, certainly. Right.

ACKERMAN: And I think I lost a lot of the good things in life by this affliction. I mean, it was an affliction in the sense that I had no capacity to leave off, and there were a lot of aspects of my family life that had to be deprived. And then for many years after Mildred [Rosenbaum Ackerman], my first wife, got polio and was in a wheelchair, a year in the hospital, my only relations with my children were getting my work done and providing for them. We never had pleasure together. I don't know how a person changes in that way. You'd think that if you had that kind of obsessive personality, you'd come out early. [laughter] It didn't come out at Yale. I just coasted along, and there was enough to do so that I wasn't a loafer, but it was a very different picture than what it has been since.



GARDNER: Going back briefly to Focillon, do you think that his impact was greater upon you because you really hadn't been exposed to ordinary art history in a way?

ACKERMAN: Well, I had two years of courses before I got into Focillon's seminar.

GARDNER: What kind of art history had you taken before that? What were they like at Yale?

ACKERMAN: The first course I took was Italian Renaissance art, and it was done by George [Heard] Hamilton. George at the time must have been all of twenty-eight years old, and he didn't know beans about Italian Renaissance art. But he was a very polished young man and got away with it, and I didn't know that he didn't know anything. We got a kind of acceptable Berensonian introduction to Renaissance art. And, you know, I don't fault him. I taught fifteenth-century Italian painting myself later on, and I never knew anything about it. [laughter]

George Kubler was something different. He was a tremendous intellect. He taught pre-Columbian art, and nobody anywhere taught pre-Columbian art. You could study pre-Columbian archaeology, and there were good field people who did it under the aegis of cultural anthropology or archaeology, but George was the only one who took this material and attempted to structure it as art history. He was really terrific in that way. I can't swear that I



took his courses before I took Focillon, but, in any case, he was another influence that was important.

GARDNER: How did their styles of teaching differ?

ACKERMAN: Focillon from the others?

GARDNER: From Kubler, say. Focillon clearly is on a different plane--

ACKERMAN: Well, Kubler was also just a kid, and I suppose his style was still in formation. But he didn't engage with the quality or implications of interaction with the object. He was seeing objects, to some extent, as artifacts and trying to build a picture of another culture out of very insubstantial evidence at that time. A lot of things hadn't been excavated.

I visited Mexico with a classmate when I was in college. I remember going to Monte Albán in Oaxaca, and everything was just humps under the sod. There was nothing-- Well, maybe one textile wall had been exposed. It was really a different era. But it was a very exciting thing to poke around with the very little information there was and try to draw some conclusions. I remember working with reproductions of Mayan manuscripts, trying to get something out of that without being able to read the language.

GARDNER: This while still on your college trip?

ACKERMAN: No, I'm talking about the class with Kubler.



GARDNER: Oh, in the class with Kubler. What I infer from that-- One of the people who wrote about you here in an article that was sent to me mentioned your treating art history almost as detective work.

ACKERMAN: Yes.

GARDNER: And it sounds as though that was prodded at this point.

ACKERMAN: Well, maybe. Maybe it just also fell in with inclination, and that I think was an aspect of NYU [New York University], too. [Richard] Krautheimer, [Karl] Lehmann, Panofsky. I felt, with respect to Focillon, that there was no chance of emulating him ever. No American could conceivably do that. It's not the same world at all. It was built on centuries of Gallic civilization. For me the big thing in my career has been to get beyond what comes naturally to an American, which is the detective, the positivist, unfolding of what happened when, and I do think that-- For two-thirds of my career, people weren't even trying to overcome that limitation. Alternatives only began to emerge, all heavily impacted by Europe, in the seventies as a result of the upheavals of the sixties.

GARDNER: And yet, at the same time, as you say, even though there were centuries of Gallic tradition-- Focillon really does offer an alternative to the



positivist American detective work.

ACKERMAN: But not a viable one for Americans, really.

One thing that's interesting in the field of art history is the way in which French scholarship has been talked down and insufficiently attended to. The only Focillon work of history that has been translated is a textbook of art in the West. His marvelous L'art des sculpteurs romans, never translated, his Piranesi book [Giovanni-Battista Piranesi], never translated. And then one of his followers, Pierre Francastel, did fascinating work, and not a single word of Francastel ever came out in English, whereas Germans were translated all the time, partly because that fit the American style, I suppose. Also, another factor was that my German teachers didn't respect French scholarship, so they would never say, "You have to read Focillon, you have to read Francastel." And actually, when I spoke of Focillon in graduate school, they patted me on the head saying, "You'll get over that, you know." [laughter]

I think that Vince [Vincent] Scully was in one of the seminars with Focillon that I was. And Vince, if anybody, managed to go on with that tradition of poesy. What did I want to say about that then? I can't remember. I had another idea on that connection of the French tradition. There may be more opening to that, the French tradition, now because there's been such a heavy impact of French



thinking through literary theory. [Jacques] Lacan and [Jacques] Derrida have been all the rage.

So it's a funny thing about the American intellect, that here we went along in our positivist way for two generations, and then, when they suddenly decided they needed theory, they went after theory in a completely uncontrolled way. It just overwhelms what's going on. Well, I had, all through that period, been calling for theoretical work and, for the most part, not getting much response. And I think I said in one of the other interviews that I felt that my German mentors, although they had all the benefit of a European philosophical background, and some of them-- For example, Panofsky was very consciously founding his work in a philosophical base of [Ernst] Cassirer and Kant. They visualized the Americans as being pure and simple, that that was their virtue, and that one shouldn't get them all mixed up with the terrible philosophical tradition of Europe that ended up with Hitler. I really think they felt that their Nazi colleagues got that way through reading the wrong philosophy, or interpreting it wrong. At any rate, they were very much antitheoretical, just as so many European scholars came to America and tried to marry the most American women they could find. It's incredible to me that every European scholar who came to America found a



wife who was as near to being a pioneer type as could be.

[laughter]

GARDNER: That's the image of the American as primitive, I suppose, riding horses onto Pacific cliffs. That's an interesting one.

Well, your education was interrupted by the war [World War II]. After you graduated, you went into the service.

ACKERMAN: One year of NYU graduate school.

GARDNER: Oh, was there? Okay. Well, then let's start with that.

ACKERMAN: Yes, because I graduated in '41, and art history had started as a major the year before I entered the major, so I was in the second class. There were three students who majored in art history. Getting honors involved writing a senior thesis. I wrote a thesis inspired by Focillon about abstraction in cave painting and the nature of abstraction in general--a really high-flown and un-American idea. They didn't allow me honors.

GARDNER: That was not considered a weighty enough topic?

ACKERMAN: I just don't know; I never got an adequate explanation. I don't think that it wasn't weighty enough. I think that they said, "How can anybody succeed when they take on something so uncontrollable as that?" I thought it was pretty good. But I lost it, so I can't confirm the



impression. I thought I had some interesting things to say. It's also indicative of my interests that I should start out not trying to do a proper historical study, but an interpretive one. And I can imagine that it wasn't too hard.

One thing I greatly regret, given my inclinations, is that I didn't study philosophy in college. So I wasn't trained in abstracting. And because the department was quite new, these very young professors were probably afraid that they wouldn't look good if they just gave out honors without discrimination. In the long run, it probably was among the upper 10 percent of honor theses of the first twenty years. But I wasn't really crushed by that.

GARDNER: Nor did it have a negative effect on your life in the long run.

ACKERMAN: No, I just think of it as a very interesting event. Well, anyway, I spent the next year at NYU Institute of Fine Arts.

GARDNER: What made you choose NYU?

ACKERMAN: Oh, it was so head and shoulders above every other place. They had an all-star cast which had been picked from refugees from Germany. There was only one distinguished American professor there, Richard Offner, who was himself trained in Germany and was exceptional in



what he did.

In the first year I had a lecture course with Krautheimer and a seminar with Lehmann-Hartleben, who taught Greek and Roman art, and then a course with Offner, I guess. I can't remember what else. But Lehmann, who was very strict and demanding, impressed me most at that moment, and I planned to do my master's thesis in his field.

Then, the second year, I dropped out in order to take a course sponsored by the army in various foreign languages in order to qualify for the intelligence service. I signed up for Turkish because, since I planned to continue with Lehmann, I thought, "Well, there's a lot of ancient sites in Turkey and it would be very handy to talk Turkish." I don't think they offered Greek. A while after, I got a note saying that I was the only person who had asked for Turkish and would I mind choosing something else so they didn't have to put on a whole program just for me. Then just at that time I ran into one of my fellow students, Kenneth Donahue, who later became the director of the Los Angeles County Museum [of Art], and he said, "Hey, I'm going out to Columbia [University] to take their Russian course. Why don't you come with me?" And I said, "I'll do that. Russian's okay." The fall of my second year out of college, I took the intensive Russian



eight hours a day. Enormously effective teaching. We were reading Tolstoy in three months. The only problem was that I forgot it as fast as I learned it.

GARDNER: Well, you didn't go into Russian art.

ACKERMAN: No, but the army failed to put me on Russian-- It was characteristically incompetent. They trained people in one language and then asked them to do another. So I entered the service in January 1943.

GARDNER: Well, tell me about your service. You enlisted then.

ACKERMAN: No, I couldn't enlist because of bad eyesight. I was drafted, actually, by that time; they were ignoring eyesight after a while. But it was also prearranged, because of the language course, that I should go right from the reception center to a training camp in signal intelligence. [tape recorder off]

GARDNER: Anyway, we got you in the service. What did they do with you? Where did they send you first? Where was the camp?

ACKERMAN: I went to camp in Warrenton, Virginia, where I spent my time picking up cigarette butts dropped by officers and--

GARDNER: Sounds appropriate for a Yale graduate.

[laughter]

ACKERMAN: --going on marches. In the signal

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intelligence, the first few hundred who joined were made officers and the next few hundred were enlisted men, which we remained. I stayed around there for a few months and just got an introduction to decoding and deciphering, which wasn't very functional. We were trained in World War I methods.

Then we were sent to England to apprentice with the British [Royal] Air Force, which had a technique for intercepting incoming planes that had been very successful. They had a ring of stations around Britain, and when they got radio transmissions from the Luftwaffe, they took readings from two different stations and were able to calculate where the source was from finding the point where sound waves crossed. They could plot the flight of a squadron of the Luftwaffe by the radio transmissions. So we were trained to do that.

Then, a couple of months later, we were shipped off to North Africa, to Algiers. At this time, Rommel's North African campaign was collapsing. There wasn't much to do there because the Germans were fleeing. The Allied army found their code books in the flight, which helped us a great deal, because they had the identification of the German army units in the code book. But, on the whole, I never did any good. My company could have been dismissed early on and saved hundreds of thousands of dollars, and



the war wouldn't have been shortened.

GARDNER: Well, ultimately, it intersected with art history, though.

ACKERMAN: It did so because we went from North Africa to north Italy. We went all the way through Italy without any contact with art, because radio interception requires being on mountaintops. So we spent the winter of 1945 in the Apennines. Then, after the final retreat, we went into northern Italy. We were actually the first company to pass the Po, because in order to get good reception, we had to move around a lot. So the entire company, the kitchen and the offices and the radio intercept materials, were all on two-ton trucks which could pick up and go someplace else fast. So when the line broke, we passed the Fifth Army infantry in two days and became the advanced guard of the Fifth Army, completely unarmed except for little carbines, which are like .22's. And wherever we went, we were the liberators.

So, when I got to the far north, I was sitting around waiting for reassignment with the rest of the company, and I got bored and volunteered to go with the army section called Monuments and Fine Arts while we waited. I went into Milan and was assigned to go to pick up the state archives from the royal palace, which had been stowed in the Certosa di Pavia, which is a Renaissance building, a



monastery in Pavia, which is maybe fifteen miles from Milan. So I'd go there every day with a truck, and people from the archive would load the truck, and then I'd come back with it. I was just a guard, also unarmed. Then, by virtue of being in this building over and over again, I got interested in it, and it became the subject of my master's thesis. It also accounts for my shifting from Lehmann to Krautheimer. This shift, in any case, was very wise, because Krautheimer and I have always been very sympathetic in our outlook.



TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE ONE

APRIL 15, 1991

GARDNER: I thought I would begin today with some recapitulations from last time. I listened to our first session and, as a result of that, ended up with several questions. I thought I'd start with those and then catch up to where our outline is. One of the things you said was that the German approach to art history, as opposed to the French, fit the American style. Could you explain that a little bit?

ACKERMAN: First, I don't think that Americans have ever understood the way French go at things, or at least they've never been able to emulate it. It's hard to say they don't understand it because the tremendous rage of Francophilia in literary theory of the last recent period indicates that it has an impact, but apart from imitating it, it doesn't seem to me that they've been able to emulate it in its creativity. But there's an element of positivism in German history which I think is very congenial to Americans, particularly Americans in disciplines where a lot has to be discovered. When you look at the difference between art history and literary studies, you have to take account of the fact that in art history there are still a vast amount of unknown facts of the kind that are essential to good criticism. That is to



say, if you don't know all the Titians that exist and you're generalizing on Titian's work, you're at a disadvantage. And all the way through, these things are true, and they've been particularly true with respect to attribution. You have to know who did what. So this fundamental work is essential.

I'm right now reading proofs [for a publisher] on a catalog of the drawings of a Renaissance architect, and the cataloging of this material will end by clarifying not only his work but all aspects of an architect's interest in that time. And yet everybody who's involved in that operation is simply accumulating knowledge or employing knowledge that they already had to solidify what we know. And that's an essential element.

It seems to me that in literary studies, in any case studies of the canon, all this was done a long time ago. Now the canon's being challenged, so that there is an aspect of discovery in literature that didn't happen before. But literary people aren't trained that way. They make their mark by having ideas. Most art historians up to now have been trained in and done dissertations in problems that are resolved in archives and in examining works. I've taken it for granted up to recently that a normal career is one in which you begin with a dissertation with a heavy archival component, and then if



you're destined to do more imaginative work, it comes later gradually. It's as if you earn your spurs in doing the archival work and then you can be off-the-wall with greater impunity at a later point.

But we were talking about French and German. The French has a great component of criticism and of the creative use of language, and that never is a factor in American scholarship. It's a miracle if an American scholar writes in English at all, much less tries to fit into a language of a critical tradition and to contribute to the language. This is what stumped me so much about [Henri] Focillon: the integration of a particular language with a particular point of view. I don't think that's so true in Germany. At least it's not true of the influential art historians. That's probably the reason for Americans' preference for the German model.

In England there was a flood of German scholarship, and the Warburg Institute there constituted a nucleus of study in the German tradition. The British just suddenly flipped over into a German mode as a result of this change in the course of World War II. Prior to this time, I don't think anybody would have trained as an art historian in England. I doubt if you could have gotten your degree anywhere in England in art history. The Courtauld Institute of the University of London offered only



certificates of attendance. Art historians frequently came out of literary studies. The English of the pre-World War II period tended to be gentlemen writers, and they had their own tradition of connoisseurship and criticism, which was very strong and which, in a way, was submerged by the new wave. The type represented by, say, Roger Fry didn't come forth again after 1940. Kenneth Clark is about the only person I can think of who straddled the two worlds. He wrote a book on the Gothic revival while he was in college--this was the twenties--which is a remarkable piece of gentlemanly writing. But then, later on, besides writing in that tradition, he also did the catalog of Leonardo da Vinci's drawings at Windsor Castle, which is a very high-level piece of positivist investigation. But, in any case, Germany seemed to exercise an attraction to the British very much the way it did to the Americans.

Of course, there's nothing in American education that would lead a person to have any defenses against the power of the German viewpoint. If you've been through a French or Italian secondary education, you're already prepared at the university to work in a different way with an awareness of the philosophical roots of your work. Americans never get that kind of thing. It's exceptional in American secondary education that it even occurs to you



that you're supposed to think independently. I remember that when I went to Yale [University], I had advanced placement in history and as a freshman was admitted into a course where we were told that the resources were available in the reserve room. I went there and discovered there was a whole bank of books, and all I knew to do was to start at the upper left and work through the shelves. It never occurred to me that you would select and invent and-- Well, I won't say that I remained naive through college, because I did get some very good training, but I wasn't prepared. When I did become aware of the fact that I needed a theoretical base to what I was doing, I still didn't have the preparation for it. To this day, I feel poorly grounded in philosophy and unhappy about the fact that I can't read philosophy with comfort.

GARDNER: So you would have actually been--happier may not be the right word, since it's too charged--with a kind of polymath or polyhistory education that would have given you a broad grounding in cross-culture rather than focusing down into one or two areas of study?

ACKERMAN: I would have enjoyed it more, I think. It wouldn't have made me more successful. It wouldn't have been appreciated. I think that my career would probably be completely different. I attribute my success to the fact that I did what I was supposed to with a little bit



of imagination thrown in. It wouldn't have worked if I'd written my dissertation in a free-ranging style and published it-- If it was of the kind you suggest, I don't think that would have impressed colleagues much.

GARDNER: Later on in your writings you talk about formalism, iconography, and connoisseurship. Were you aware of that split even when you were at Yale? Was there a formalist versus an iconographic--? Were there two strains running through the education there? Would you classify your education at Yale as one or the other?

ACKERMAN: Well, I noticed that more later on. In retrospect, I don't really think that there was an essential difference between iconography and formal analysis. In a way, they both exclude aspects of history that don't relate internally to art, because, whether you're doing connoisseurship and formal analysis or iconography, you're just looking at other works of art. An iconographer may go beyond that and look at some popular imagery, but it's all images. It doesn't refer out to other aspects of society. A person like [Erwin] Panofsky, who possessed a very broad culture, would do what he called iconology, and that elevated the study of images and symbols to a high level. But his followers never achieved that. This whole period of art history



could be called modernist. One could compare the evolution of abstract art with the evolution of abstract art history--that is, abstract in the sense of not interacting with the context. It survived longer in art history than in art.

Most people are being trained to do the same kind of art history today as they were in my time. But it's just beginning to break down. Students read a lot of theoretical work on their own that the professors don't read, and many appointments in major departments are now of people with a new point of view. To some extent, they're fashionable critical and theoretical approaches, which worries me a little, because I think people are still going to have to be disciplined in historical investigation, and some of the purveyors of the fashionable theory wouldn't know how to train a person in historical investigation. You notice a vast difference today in the material presented at the College Art Association [of America] as against ten or twenty years ago. The association itself has been taken over by the new viewpoints. The traditional historians are in the minority, as on the board of directors or in planning the sessions at annual meetings.

GARDNER: So at Yale, then, your background really would



have gotten you an acquaintanceship with both approaches to art history in a sort of synthetic way.

ACKERMAN: There were no people who were professional connoisseurs on the Yale faculty. The first of those that I encountered was [Richard] Offner at NYU [New York University]. The Yale people--I think I said this before--they were all very young. The whole department was just emerging. Some of them, like Sumner Crosby, were directly descended from the French medieval archaeologists, and actually Crosby's major work was excavating and reporting on a cathedral. Others at the time were still trying to evolve an approach. George Kubler was the most theoretically inclined and already gave us an introduction to his fusion of anthropology and art history in the study of Middle American art. Well, I think that everybody at that time was feeling their way. In the thirties, they certainly hadn't coagulated into any viewpoint. Meyer Schapiro was probably the most mature American scholar of that time in his method and approach through his Marxist background and his vast knowledge of other disciplines.

GARDNER: Did you ever consider going to Yale for graduate school, also?

ACKERMAN: No. It wasn't a desirable option at the time.

GARDNER: Were there any other graduate programs? You mentioned that NYU was the only place to go. Were there



other graduate programs in art history at the time?

ACKERMAN: I could have gone to Columbia [University]. Schapiro was there, but he was more or less by himself. The other people, excepting Marguerite Bieber in archaeology, were not as notable. But NYU just had a stellar cast. The other place would have been Princeton [University], but it was too hermetic for my taste, though they were producing a good many of the art historians of that generation.

GARDNER: What were some of the classes you took at NYU?

ACKERMAN: Well, [Richard] Krautheimer gave classes in Renaissance and baroque architecture, and [Karl] Lehmann had a course in Greek sculpture. [Walter] Friedlaender did seventeenth-century Italian and French painting. Offner would give a course called Early Italian Renaissance Painting, which never got past Giotto; he would spend a whole year on Giotto. [Martin] Weinberger did Michelangelo. Asian material was done by [Alfred] Salmony, whom I didn't find very impressive. Who else? Well, there were visitors, too. Jurgis Baltrusaitis, who was a pupil and son-in-law of Focillon, taught there in Romanesque and Gothic art while I was there. [Rudolf] Wittkower came for a year, and Henry-Russell Hitchcock did nineteenth-century architecture. I never had a course with [Wolfgang] Lotz, but he came there after I left.



[of Fine Arts]. Incidentally, the proximity to the Metropolitan, apart from the fact that the Metropolitan library was very useful to us, was not capitalized on by any professor other than Offner.

GARDNER: Really?

ACKERMAN: Nobody told us to go look at works of art. It was also characteristic of this generation, I think, that it held photographs to be more useful than originals. Of course, when doing iconography, photographs are almost as good. Well, there's something about the kind of formal analysis that went on that didn't involve any sensual factors. That is to say, form was thought of as it is represented in a black-and-white photograph, and color and texture and scale were irrelevant. It was strange.

Also, I had no sense of what constituted artistic quality, and when I went abroad as a student and found that it was possible on a student stipend to collect drawings, it was the first time that I ever began to understand what discriminations were or to make some sort of critical observation.

GARDNER: Where did you live when you first came to New York? I assumed that you lived down in Washington Square.

ACKERMAN: No. At first I was in a rooming house on Sixty-fifth [Street], I think it was. Funny kind of establishment for genteel young men and women who were



starting their careers, where we were served breakfast and dinner, too. And there was a genteel southern landlady in command of this group. It was still a time when women would not have gone to a place where there were also men unless it was supervised. It wasn't a particularly congenial environment, but it was a room. One day I came home in the evening and all the furniture was out on the street. The landlady had decided that she was giving up, and we all had to find other solutions overnight.

When I returned after the war, I was over on West Seventy-ninth Street in a rooming house without the supervision and feeding. I married Mildred Rosenbaum, a dancer in Martha Graham's studio, and we moved in there together into one room with a double bed and not much space around it and one burner in the corner. And Mildred immediately got pregnant, probably because there wasn't enough room to sit down, and we moved to the east eighties, to the janitor's apartment of an elegant apartment house.

GARDNER: That was very bohemian.

ACKERMAN: Well, it wasn't very poetic. I mean, it was just glum. The West Seventy-ninth Street room had an excellent view of a funeral parlor. Before the marriage I didn't like spending time alone and did everything I could to be out all the time. I sang in choirs--performing



choirs, not church choirs--both for sociability and to keep out of the rooming house.

GARDNER: A talent you hadn't mentioned previously. Did you seek out the art sites of New York, especially given your interest in architecture? Did you wander around?

ACKERMAN: No. No. I didn't do enough-- I adopted a strange attitude that everything is in photographs and books. I had kept my notes in graduate school and gave them recently to the Archives of American Art, and out of one notebook fell a slip from a student skit that we used to do at Christmastime, a snatch of dialogue that went something like-- Student A: "Have you been to the Met?" Student B: "No, where is that?" A: "Oh, it's just down the block on Eighty-second Street." B: "What's new there?" A: "Well, there's a good peanut butter and jelly sandwich for thirty-five cents." [laughter]

GARDNER: It's a good metaphor. Okay. I'm going to pick up now on where we left off last time, which had you in Pavia [Italy] and working collecting the archives of the Certosa. Could you talk a little bit about what must have been a sort of flash of light at one point when you decided that this was what you wanted to study?

ACKERMAN: I don't remember any flash. I just found the place attractive, and already, when I left, I thought that the master's thesis that I had launched on was ill-



conceived.

GARDNER: What was that?

ACKERMAN: It was on Greek grave steles with a sitting and standing figure. The trouble with it was that it didn't constitute a real class of objects, because there were also steles with a sitting and two standing figures or two sitting and one standing figure, or whatever, and my category wasn't autonomous. It was stupid, which was not usual for Karl Lehmann, who was enormously intelligent. But anyway, I couldn't see going back to that. Then, you know, I'd absorbed Italian air as well as the Certosa, and I caught the bug for working on this kind of material. I really came to see that architecture was my field. I can't remember what relationship that decision had to the fact that I did my first major article on the cathedral of Milan ["'Ars Sine Scientia Nihil Est': Gothic Theory of Architecture at the Cathedral of Milan." Art Bulletin 31 (1949): 84-111]. Whether that was before or afterwards-- I didn't do that article with Krautheimer but with Panofsky, who recommended I look at some documents of the cathedral of Milan, and in these documents they discuss theoretical foundations of Gothic architecture.

GARDNER: What year would these documents have been?

Contemporary to the building of it?

ACKERMAN: The relevant documents began in 1390 when they



were trying to decide what form the cathedral should have, and northern experts were called to discuss the issue and fight with the Italians. The northerners regarded the Italians as completely incompetent in the field of theory and engineering, so there were controversies. Through the minutes of the meetings, I could find what kind of criteria were used for the construction of a Gothic cathedral. So in some ways this was illustrative of Gothic practice in general. And the article, which came out in 1948, proved to be the one that was most quoted of any I've ever written. This made me wonder: If I could do my most celebrated work before getting a Ph.D., why does one go through all the fuss of getting the degree? [laughter] But it remained a key article on Gothic practice and theory. Panofsky was very generous about this, because he told me about these documents, about which he had written himself at one point, and encouraged me to do it for a term paper, and then the paper turned out well, so he suggested that it go further. That was also the subject of my first appearance at a meeting of the College Art Association when I was twenty-eight years old, I guess. To add to the tension of that debut, my wife was in labor as I spoke. I had to leave New York to go to Boston. But I got back in time.

GARDNER: That article, I guess, broke ground in history



of Gothic architecture rather than in historiography. Although it seems to me, based on some of the other things that I've read of yours over the last month, that it's that historical method that's very important for you, too. You're a very thoroughgoing historian, and I guess this was your first effort at really reconstructing history to that great a degree. Is that true?

ACKERMAN: Well, this is all based on documents. The building of the cathedral came after the period of the discussions, and, therefore, it represents work that didn't relate entirely to the building. And I suppose that it was really concurrent with the master's thesis that focused on the Certosa [di Pavia] that evolved a theory about how the Certosa happened to be built in a Romanesque revival style. The theory being that in provincial places like Lombardy the early Renaissance stepped back to antiquity indirectly, by returning to the Romanesque. It happened in Florence, too, where there was a revival of the eleventh- and twelfth-century architecture such as the baptistery and San Miniato in the early Renaissance. It was an interesting cultural phenomenon of the revival of a native earlier revival of antiquity. I published an article in the student journal on that subject ["The Certoza of Pavia and the Renaissance in Milan." Marsyas 5 (1949): 23-37], which actually is



being republished now in my collected papers.

GARDNER: Was the cathedral one in the Art Bulletin?

ACKERMAN: Yes. The Art Bulletin was a place for validation. You publish there and then you're all right. Well, it was extremely useful to me to have published two articles before going abroad to do my dissertation, because it was on that basis that I was hired for my first job. I never looked for a job. When I was in Rome after graduate school, I just received an invitation, which, when I returned, I accepted. I did a good turn for the University of California, because I was invited to come when I still had a year or more to my term at the American Academy [in Rome], and I was told that there a loyalty oath had been imposed. I think they said, "You may not want to accept this job on this account." And in the correspondence, I conspired to refuse the job and make it possible for the chairman of the department to go to the administration and say, "Look, we're losing the best young talent because of this loyalty oath." So I made this gesture without the slightest risk. Then, actually, the legislation was altered so that the particular sting of the oath, which had been directed against the university in particular--I think that was during [Ronald W.] Reagan's administration as governor--then spread to



everyone who worked for the state. And the people who had resigned at the time of the first oath started to come back again.



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ACKERMAN: What would have been really brave would have been to refuse to come back even after the resolution of the university's particular problems, because I still had to sign the oath that was administered to everyone working for the state. But for whatever moral value it's given, it meant more for me to be in California where my family was than to stand on principle to that extent. I was influenced by the fact that some very distinguished people who had left were now returning.

GARDNER: Right. When you returned to NYU after the war, had the department changed at all? Was it pretty much the same cast of characters, or--?

ACKERMAN: Yes. I think all of those visitors that I mentioned must have come after the war, which was already going on in my first year of graduate school. I was there one year before and then two years in residence after.

GARDNER: Right. Give me little portraits of some of your NYU professors. Start with Lehmann, since I guess he was the first one you worked with closely.

ACKERMAN: Yes. Well, Lehmann had a very rigorous method and insisted on exceedingly hard work: no excuses for the difficulties in the way of learning every language that could be useful to you. He was a tough disciplinarian,



and I think that anybody in his class would be terrified to come in with a sloppy piece of work. He was a terrific driver himself, just impassioned with his work. So he was an exceedingly good model. And working with somebody like that, too, meant that you were in the classroom only with totally committed people. There wasn't a place where any casual person would allow himself to rest.

At that time, the Institute student was of two kinds. There were Park Avenue ladies in fur coats who were cultivating themselves--and they mostly didn't go into the seminars--and students who were tremendously involved. I don't recall any student of that type that was uncertain about what he or she was doing. Everyone I could remember from there became a professional who is presently, if not retired, at a major university.

GARDNER: What was Lehmann like? Tall, short?

ACKERMAN: He was short and blond, balding, enormous intensity of look, and he had one wall eye that made one uncertain as to which of his two eyes to contact. A very heavy accent and just vibrant physically, very tense and active. At that time, I think he got a divorce and married one of my fellow students, Phyllis Williams Lehmann, who later became dean of Smith College and is a very distinguished archaeologist who shared his work as long as he lived.



At the opposite pole was Friedlaender. He wanted his students to be around him all the time, and he had a circle of women like a harem. They were always in his office doing things for him, and he was a kind of manipulator who never could do anything for himself. He was large and overweight and self-indulgent. People learned from Friedlaender by absorbing his thoughts and the atmosphere that he created around him. I didn't feel disposed to this. He was always very suspicious of me because he couldn't bring me into the inner circle. I can't think of any two more contrasting people.

GARDNER: Krautheimer is the one with whom you said you were most sympathetic.

ACKERMAN: Yes. We've always worked very easily together. Krautheimer had no children, and I felt almost like an adopted son. He was at Vassar [College] but doing seminars at NYU, and I would go to Poughkeepsie on weekends and spend them in their house.

GARDNER: How did you first run into him? Through a class?

ACKERMAN: Taking his course. I suppose that my thinking about starting with Lehmann had to do with the fact that Krautheimer wasn't regular faculty. I don't know, because I should have been, by disposition, in the architecture field.



GARDNER: What was Krautheimer like?

ACKERMAN: Well, he was a very effusive and open person and very spontaneous. He would often put a slide on the screen and stop in the middle of the lecture and say, "My God! I've never seen that [detail] before!" He'd go off and explain what it was he'd never seen before. He had a famous habit of disturbing everybody whenever he went into the library by mumbling and whistling and carrying on a soliloquy. Well, he's a person that every student at Vassar and at NYU loved whether they worked with him or not. He just was generous and vibrant.

His wife was a scholar, too, and at the time I was there they were working on the monograph on Ghiberti [Lorenzo Ghiberti], which is interesting, because sculpture had been her field. She had published in Italian Romanesque sculpture.

GARDNER: What was her name?

ACKERMAN: Trude Krautheimer-Hess. She also started to collect drawings. They had a wonderful collection of drawings, so good that they couldn't afford to have it around. They had to put it in a vault. Anyway, at one point he had a very dangerous brain hemorrhage in about 1947, and we gave him up for lost. I remember thinking with some regret, but with no question, that I would have to help Trude finish the Ghiberti book. He pulled out of



it completely. It didn't leave any traces in his life, and he's now ninety-five.

GARDNER: Oh, he's still alive.

ACKERMAN: And still working full-time.

GARDNER: Where is he now?

ACKERMAN: He lives in Rome. He lives in an apartment with the Hertziana Library, which is the finest resource for the study of Italian art in the world. It's a German institute. He taught a seminar in the summer of 1991, bounding through the streets and churches of Rome.

Trude died about three or four years ago. She was well on in years, too.

What I remember about Krautheimer's method is that it was hindside front. He started with an answer and then looked for a way to arrive at it--discovery by intuition. He was also very different from Lehmann in that he was somewhat impatient with the details. When I coedited his papers for his sixtieth birthday, I kept running into citations that didn't check out, and I'd have to hunt as to whether footnote 170 of an article or book he had quoted was really 710 or 107. But he has had ideas that altered the study of early Christian architecture and several other fields and has exerted a tremendous influence.

At the time that he started publishing in early



Christian architecture, there was nobody, as far as I can recall, anywhere but in Italy who had taken any interest in this field. I do recall a book by Butler on Syrian churches that is an exception, and [Charles Rufus] Morey and [Kurt] Weitzmann in Princeton were working on figural art of the period. But Krautheimer's work on the corpus of early Christian churches in Rome [Corpus basilicarum Christianarum Romae] is a monument. There are very few works of such basic significance in a particular field of that stature.

GARDNER: How about Panofsky? Tell me about Panofsky.

ACKERMAN: Panofsky was the person who was most discouraging to a graduate student because it was clear the moment that you'd had time in his class that you never would do what he could do. He was way beyond the capacity of anybody who had already reached twenty-two without knowing all that he must have known when he was twenty-two. And it wasn't just knowledge. He had a very grand view of things. His lectures--I never had a seminar with Panofsky; I don't know that he gave seminars--were completed works of art. They weren't the usual kind of lecture. They were formulated with grand schemes where the beginning and the end were worked out.

In one course that he did on Gothic art he presented a theory about types of space in Gothic--I recall that



there were four or five successive spatial styles--and would move laterally through each from architecture to miniatures to sculpture to reliquaries, showing how each of these, in turn, were manifestations of one particular spatial viewpoint. This work was never published, and it's a pity, because it was very exciting.

With Panofsky, these creations were the excuse for stimulating thought and not a search for fundamental knowledge. There were ways in which it didn't matter whether something was right or wrong, that the process was the important thing. I remember, in particular, an article that he wrote on a portrait of an anonymous man, a portrait by Jan Van Eyck. The article proves that it's Binchois, the musician at the court of the duke of Berri. I don't think anybody was convinced, but that was a great article because of all that it went through to demonstrate the culture of the court and the links in art and music. It was so engaging that whether the conclusion was correct was only a minor point. And the same thing would have been true of the spatial template for Gothic art, because having conceived it, he had to make the things fit, and, naturally, that required a shoehorn. It was as a jeu d'esprit that it came across. But that was a great experience. And then he was very good in helping a person



with a piece of work.

GARDNER: You mentioned the other students who all went on to important places. Could you mention who some of them were and talk about what they were like as students?

ACKERMAN: Well, some of them had been around for quite a while by the time I went, like Fred Hart. Fred Hart was a very spirited, extravagant person, I would call him, as he remained all through his career. He taught first at Washington University and then at [University of] Virginia and wrote lots of textbooks that were successful, did some good work, a catalog of Michelangelo drawings and-- His extravagance entered into his work always to some extent, so he didn't have the great admiration of his colleagues, but they recognized his value, his productivity.

Milton Brown, I guess, was the oldest. No, I guess Milton and Fred are both in their late seventies now. He was only there for a short while before going on to teach within the city system in New York in American art. His wife Blanche [Brown], who worked with Lehmann and was in the education department at the Metropolitan Museum--

And Esther Gordon Dotson, who now just retired from Cornell [University], was an anticipator of the liberated woman of today. I mean, she really sensed her equality with the men, and she was right. [tape recorder off]



Creighton Gilbert was the son of two academics at Duke [University], and he started coming to the Institute at the age of seventeen. We called him the wunderkind. He was always somewhat uncomfortable and felt that he had to prove that he was the equal of everybody else. He loved to make disparaging remarks in my direction, and I always accepted them without too much reaction. Creighton is now at Yale. He's been in a number of different posts, at Emory [University], at Ringling Museum of Art in Sarasota [Florida], Cornell.

Let's see. Harry Bober, who later taught at the Institute and married a student of Lehmann's, Phyllis Pray [Bober], who became a dean in the graduate school of Bryn Mawr College. Patricia Egan, who was at Vassar for a while, but then went to work as the art editor at [Harry N.] Abrams [Inc.]. Another Lehmann student by the name of Elsbeth Dusenberry, who did a lot of work on the excavations at Samothrace. Stanley Meltzoff is another one, a brilliant historian who did a couple of exciting articles on nineteenth-century art, didn't have much taste for the university life, and became a commercial artist and did covers for Scientific American and the like. I think he learned a lot from his work with Friedlaender in baroque painting that helped him as an artist.



*[Meltzoff has recently resumed scholarship, and his book on a Botticelli painting won a prize. He is presently collaborating with Sir Ernst Gombrich.] Morris Dorsky, who taught at Brooklyn [College]. I can't remember the modernists very well, though Robert Goldwater had some good students in that field.

GARDNER: I guess you all associated according to your areas of study and the professors you worked with and so on.

ACKERMAN: Well, no, I wouldn't say too much. I think there was just a dearth of people studying modern at that time. There were only about twenty-five really committed students. And then there were other people who really were serious but who, in order to be able to go to graduate school, had to work, and then they would come in for one evening course or something like that, so we didn't see them very much. It was quite a small nucleus of people who were at it all the time.

GARDNER: In Who's Who [in America] it says that you also had an instructorship at Yale from '46 to '48.

ACKERMAN: Oh, that was just a fill-in job for Carroll Meeks. I think I did spring and summer term that year. I

* Ackerman added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.



gave a course in art appreciation.

GARDNER: It must have been thrilling for you.

ACKERMAN: I had to invent everything. The subject demanded a completely different approach to things. I'd be interested to see what I told people. [laughter]

GARDNER: How did you meet your wife?

ACKERMAN: Just before I went into the army-- I was going to be inducted in California, since I grew up there. And I had a Christmas vacation between that preparatory course in language and entering the service, so I went back home. I called a fellow student [Peggy McGuire] who had gone out to Mills College for her master's degree. I guess she followed her fiancé out West. He was in the regular army. And she was rooming with Mildred, who was at Mills getting her master's in dance. I asked Peggy out to a New Year's party, and she said, "Oh, my roommate has nothing to do on New Year's. Do you mind if she comes along?" I said, "Sure, bring her along." So we went to this party and we all got very drunk. It was too late to get back to Oakland, so I brought them home and deposited them in my mother's guest room. And the next morning, before I got up, my mother [Louise Sloss Ackerman] was nursing Mildred for a terrible hangover.

GARDNER: What an introduction.

ACKERMAN: The first time she met Mildred she was in bad



condition. Anyway, I didn't have any ideas about the future with her then. But when I went into the army, she wrote all the time, and I answered occasionally in a noncommittal way. And I came back to find one of my fellow students that I was extremely attached to--that was Esther Dodson--and I continued my pursuit of Esther. Then, on one occasion, I took Esther to a performance in which Mildred was performing. She came to our table--it was a cabaret--and we had drinks together. Then the Esther relationship wasn't going so well, and I started dating Mildred. The cabaret was a money-maker.

GARDNER: That's a great story. I really like that. You went off in 1949 to Rome. How did that fellowship come about?

ACKERMAN: In '47 I guess the [American] Academy was announcing fellowships, so they had appointed one art historian, and this was the second round. Krautheimer knew about it from his work in Rome, and he said I should apply. I said, "The American Academy will never appoint a Jew. It's hopeless." The academy had been, up until recent times, very reactionary. Even when I got on the board there were problems about women, and it took a long time to bring it around. Anyway, Krautheimer said, "You do it anyway." I won the fellowship. Also I got a Fulbright [Fellowship], so it was possible, since the



academy at that time gave two-year fellowships, to be there for three years.

GARDNER: Terrific.

ACKERMAN: I had the one baby [Anne Ackerman] at that time. She was eighteen months. So we went over to Rome with the baby and got an apartment, a wonderful place overlooking the botanical gardens in the Corsini Palace. In that place, which was a private house where there was a free floor, there was a visitor named Edwin Denby, who was the dance critic of the [New York] Herald Tribune, who then became a lifelong friend and was a wonderful person who brought us into contact with a number of people in New York.

GARDNER: What were your days like? You talked last time about being a workaholic. Did you get yourself up in the morning, say good-bye to your wife and child, and go over to the library?

ACKERMAN: I guess pretty much.

GARDNER: When you applied for it, did you have a project in mind?

ACKERMAN: I had offered a project about Vitruvius in the Renaissance, the acceptance and discovery of Vitruvius. Now, this is a project that had been worked out completely in a library and could only be carried out in a library. On the way down, I stopped off and visited [Bernard]



Berenson with a letter, and he invited me to lunch. He always liked to grill young hopefuls. And, of course, this idea of Vitruvius was something that wasn't his cup of tea. He was critical about my coming to Italy and burying yourself in a library. I don't know that that's what changed my mind, but it helped. Also, Italy changed my mind. I realized what a wonderful thing it was to be out there looking at the real thing. So the project didn't survive even the first weeks.

Well, then I got along without any particular project, except that I knew about the marvelous collection of architectural drawings of the Renaissance that was in the Uffizi Gallery drawing cabinet, and started to go through them. At that time, in the immediate postwar period, the Uffizi drawing cabinet was completely unheated, and going through the drawings in the wintertime there was torture. I found that as I took notes, the pencil would fall out of my hands because I was so cold, so I would go over to a little brazier in the corner and warm my hands up and come back until I dropped the pencil again.

GARDNER: It's practically monastic.

ACKERMAN: Yes, and at that time, most of the drawings were just in great heaps; they hadn't even mounted them. And nobody went there, partly because of the temperature



and partly because the Italians at that time really never exploited their riches.

Then a very remarkable sequence of things occurred. I found a number of drawings for buildings in Rome, for the same building done by different architects. So I thought I'd do my thesis about these competitions, if that's what they were, or cases where different architects drew for the same building. I thought a series of studies of these differences would be interesting.

When I got back to Rome, I brought photographs of a batch of drawings for the Vatican to the head of the Vatican museums. He said that he had been eager to revive a series on the history of the Vatican palace which had started before the war. He said, "Why don't you do this? Just work on the Vatican things, and if it turns out, then we'll publish it for you." That was incredible, because I was a student. He didn't know what I could do, and I didn't know what I could do, and he was offering me publication by the Vatican. It was a big risk on his part. But anyway, that possibility seemed exciting to me: I started working in that direction and found a wealth of archival documents on the Renaissance portion of the Vatican, particularly on the construction of the huge court of the Belvedere, now the core of the museums. It became a thesis, and later they did publish it. It's that



kind of approach to things [that was] congenial to Krautheimer, so he didn't object at all to the fact that it was a long way from where it started.

GARDNER: Did he supervise your work at all while you were over there, or did you work pretty much on your own? It sounds as though you were very independent.

ACKERMAN: It was hard to pull it together until I had the documents all ordered. There were two kinds of documents: archives and drawings. And the drawings were very important. They interacted a lot. The archival document would describe something going on--you didn't quite know what it was--and then if you had a sixteenth-century drawing that showed a part of the building, you could deduce what the verbal document referred to.

GARDNER: Well, I have looked at the book [The Cortile del Belvedere (1954)], and I think it's absolutely fascinating.

ACKERMAN: The most exciting thing was that the key to the interpretation, which is a fresco that shows the building as if it were an ancient ruin, was an image that had not ever been known. I was visiting the Castel Sant'Angelo, which is the tomb of Hadrian that the popes built into a palace and fortress, which has sixteenth-century frescoes all through the interior, and I took a back stair down from the main part of the museum to the ground floor. Hanging on the staircase was a detached fresco fragment



that looked as if it had been taken from a frieze somewhere in the Castel. I passed it by and then had a double take and said to myself, "Hey, that looks awfully like the Belvedere." And I went back and looked at it, and, sure enough, it was a depiction of the building the way that it had been designed by Bramante, but then represented as partly in ruins. In fact, a portion of it had collapsed in the 1530s, so that there was a ruined section. And this became the key to the interpretation: it was wonderfully exciting to discover it.

Then I published an article in the Warburg Journal ["The Belvedere as a Classical Villa." Warburg Journal 14 (1951): 70-91] on what had been brought up by the fresco, why a contemporary building would be represented as an ancient ruin. In some sense, you could say that that made it allied to the original theme of Vitruvius in the Renaissance.

Well, anyway, I finished it before going to work, so that I passed my orals in New York on the way back to California.

GARDNER: Was that your first time back? Had you been exclusively in Europe those three years?

ACKERMAN: Yes. Then I wrote the book afterwards under the most appalling circumstances, because Mildred got a job at Mills at the same time as I started at [University



of California] Berkeley, and six weeks into the first semester she came down with polio--

GARDNER: Oh, no.

ACKERMAN: --and was away from home for most of the year. Well, after a couple of months, she was commuting to rehabilitation every day. And by that time we had two children. I had charge of the kids, caring for her, teaching for the first time, and having to plan courses in two departments: architecture and art history. And I finished the book. Never later did I understand how anybody could have done that who wasn't insane. I must have been insane.

GARDNER: That must be it.



TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE ONE

APRIL 22, 1991

GARDNER: Once again, I'm going to start off by recapitulating, if you'll forgive me. I thought I'd ask you a little bit more about Bernard Berenson. You mentioned visiting him on your way to Rome. Could you describe him and what he was like at that stage of his life? Nineteen forty-nine, was it?

ACKERMAN: Yes. Well, he was very old and frail by then. He had an excellent cook, so that if you went there for a meal, you were wonderfully fed while he was eating pabulum and dreadful-looking stuff that he could digest. And he always had several people at table, conversationalists that he cultivated. On one occasion that I was there, there was an Italian count who was a confidante of Berenson's, then his companion, Niki Mariano, and I think I met Muriel Sparks, a British author, there. People working in the field like myself normally made a visit to pay respects. He liked to have his guests explain themselves at length, and he would cross-examine one. And I found it quite difficult to get anything to eat because of the cross-examination.

I remember the first occasion: It's Italian etiquette to serve a guest before you serve the host. I was served this large, white dome of something, and I



didn't know what it was. I tried to cut a piece out of it, and it didn't yield, and so I was very flustered and embarrassed. Finally, the waiter had to put it down on the table, and I sawed away at it and got a piece--cheese or something like that. I'm not sure what it was.

GARDNER: And you still aren't. [laughter]

ACKERMAN: Berenson, at that time, represented a kind of art connoisseurship in which I had not been prepared and which was of a nature that was particularly useful to people in the museum profession, because they had the responsibility to choose works of art and to reject things of lesser value, misattributed and the like. As far as the field was concerned, this was not something that attracted me, so I wasn't really going to Berenson for his views of things, but rather to pay respects to a person who was really the first American who made a name discussing art. He certainly was a character, an institution, and worth having seen.

The villa which he built for himself in the early part of the century was a splendid building, and there was a wonderful garden. He bequeathed it to Harvard [University]. Harvard, for quite a while, was ambivalent about whether it wanted to take on that responsibility at such a distance--it now consumes millions annually and requires aggressive fund-raising--and it was rather an odd



enterprise for Harvard, because they became, in a way, a kind of feudal landlord. The land was still being cultivated by people you could call peasants, because it was on contracts of mezzadria, which was a method whereby the sharecroppers on the land came up with half of their produce for the villa. It was a really major undertaking for the administration of the villa to shift over in accordance with requirements of the Italian law at a later date, so that the property would be cultivated by some of the same people, but as hired hands. There were a lot of things that were very amusing about the turnover, because Berenson's staff stayed at the villa when Harvard took it over, and they injected his aristocratic way of life, which was inconsistent with world scholarship. They consistently referred to the fellows at the villa-- Which is now called the Harvard Center for Italian Renaissance Studies, although still referred to as [Villa] i Tatti, which was Berenson's name for it, meaning "the senses." The staff would refer to the scholars as gli studenti, and they would differentiate very strikingly by class. Gli studenti didn't qualify to be treated in the same way as the professors who visited, although all of the studenti were younger professors themselves. A fellowship to this center is gained by competition primarily among younger scholars, because there's a regulation that they have to



be within a few years of completing their dissertation.

In a sense, the program of the center is affected by Berenson's view of things, the breadth of fields, the fact that there are about five fields in which people are appointed, and the fact that there's been a lot of interchange there. There's been considerable stimulus to a broad-based study of Italian culture of the Renaissance and a movement away from overspecialization. All of that I think Berenson would have approved of. By now, to some extent, the old aristocratic air has disappeared, but it's still difficult to run something built like that without retaining some of it: the grand salon with extraordinary paintings in it, corridors with fantastic works of art. The place retains something of that Edwardian tone it started with.

GARDNER: Did you visit it often when you were done there?

ACKERMAN: Only twice in my student days. Then I frequently returned after it became part of Harvard.

GARDNER: He would have died when you were still at [University of California] Berkeley, wouldn't he?

ACKERMAN: I think so, in the mid-fifties. I'm not quite sure.

GARDNER: How did the art strike you on your visit? Here you are, as you described last time, an art history student who is used to working with photographs.



ACKERMAN: Well, it's a very extraordinary experience to see these things that one normally sees in museums as part of somebody's everyday existence. That's a very unusual thing. And it's a good setting for a lot of those works, although obviously maybe the majority of them were meant for public consumption, that is, the old panels and predellas and the like. So you can't say you're getting, in most cases, closer to the original situation by seeing them in a house. But it was a very unusual and pleasant experience. Well, I suppose I'd seen a number of private collections before that time, but nothing of such high quality. And I think you have a special feeling about seeing fifteenth-century Italian Florentine works of art in Florentine territory. It's a very different atmosphere than that of the American Academy in Rome, which was built to be a place for study and the pursuit of the arts in a rather monastic style.

GARDNER: I gather from some of the things you said that after you left Rome you didn't hear from him again or see Berenson again. Or did you correspond?

ACKERMAN: No, I didn't make a bond with him. I had a colleague at Harvard, Sydney [J.] Freedberg, who had a close relationship with Berenson. Sydney is working in the Berensonian tradition; he was a connoisseur, and he had been in art dealing at one point like Berenson.



Berenson was never directly in dealing but was only affiliated with a dealer, out of which he got a lot of criticism because of suspicion that he had benefited by attributions that he had made. And my colleague Sydney did stay in close touch with him. *[Without ever letting his attributions cloud his probity. Sydney later became chief curator at the National Gallery of Art.]

GARDNER: The other thing that I wanted to go back to from the year we talked about last time was your family. During the time you were at Yale [University] and then NYU [New York University], did you go back to San Francisco for summers or--?

ACKERMAN: Yes.

GARDNER: How did you occupy yourself?

ACKERMAN: I made a couple of trips by myself, once to Mexico, once to Florida, painting with a painter friend, but I went back to San Francisco almost as a regular thing. I had worked in the San Francisco Museum [of Art] as a teenager, but I didn't return to that. I really can't remember much about how I occupied my time.

GARDNER: How you spent your summers? Oh, I suspect the way anybody that age would have spent summers to--

* Ackerman added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.



ACKERMAN: Well, like many people of that age, going home infantilized me. I didn't do anything serious. Except to meet my future wife [Mildred Rosenbaum Ackerman].

GARDNER: Right, right. Where was she from?

ACKERMAN: Kalamazoo, Michigan.

GARDNER: Of all places.

ACKERMAN: Yeah. Well, Kalamazoo is a smallish mid-western town which had a fairly high cultural level. It was unusual. There was a theater and a symphony orchestra. Her father [Lester Rosenbaum] was very ambitious for her in the arts. Her father and my mother [Louise Sloss Ackerman] were both arts encouragers and, oddly enough, both ceramists.

GARDNER: How interesting. Your brother [Lloyd S. Ackerman, Jr.] died during World War II.

ACKERMAN: Yes.

GARDNER: Had you been close to him? There was such a difference in age.

ACKERMAN: He was ten years older, and he was away at college at the time when I might have had links with him, so I didn't remember him at all at that time.

GARDNER: Okay. Well, let's get you to Berkeley now. There you are at the American Academy in Rome. How were the first approaches made to you by Berkeley? Do you recall?



ACKERMAN: Oh, just by letter. In 19-- What year was it? Just after Anne [Ackerman] was born, in 1948, I went to San Francisco with Mildred. We got a babysitter to take care of Anne and went with my parents into the Sierras, into the source of the San Francisco water, which is way up in the mountains, a beautiful, absolutely unspoiled area. My father [Lloyd S. Ackerman] at that time was a commissioner of the water department.

GARDNER: There's another story. [laughter]

ACKERMAN: He had a privilege of going to the camp that was set up there and where there was a simple place to stay and wonderful food. He had along as a guest--and I don't quite know how this came about--the chairman of the art history wing of the art department at Berkeley, Walter Horn. He was a German who, unlike my teachers, had come to America by his own choice. He was a pure Aryan, and he had a brother in the SS [Schutzstaffel], and he just didn't like the way things were going. He came to the U.S. and went directly to California. He was the first art historian that had ever been there. He had been preceded in teaching by artists who taught art appreciation.

GARDNER: The famous art appreciation.

ACKERMAN: Yes, so I knew Walter through the excursion, and it was he who sent the letter of invitation. Hiring



practices in those times were not like they are today: an open and regularly established slave market organized by the College Art Association [of America]. They were mostly by the old-boy network, which kept women out, of course. And his invitation to me could have been influenced by the fact that he knew me and my family and the whole San Francisco circle from which I came. On the other hand, I can say, in all modesty, that it was a reasonable choice on his part, that among young people working on the Renaissance at that time, I was a good buy at \$5,000 a year. [laughter]

GARDNER: A bargain at any price.

ACKERMAN: Well, to justify his choice, I had published, as I said, two articles and a couple of reviews, and they were well received. And then Mildred got a job at Mills [College]. So we were very well set up.

GARDNER: Was there anything about the department that attracted you?

ACKERMAN: I didn't know much about it. I was attracted later by the fact that the artists were very much in touch with what was going on and introduced me to the whole radical shift happening in New York at this time with abstract expressionism, the so-called New York school. Three or four of them had been students of Hans Hofmann, and they did their best to keep in touch. Each year they



brought some New York artist to teach in the department. And that was very beneficial for me.

GARDNER: Who were some of these San Francisco artists? Or Berkeley artists, as it were?

ACKERMAN: Well, none was known very well outside the area, except for David Park and Elmer Bischoff. Others that I can remember were Carl Kasten and Felix Ruvolo, neither of whom really broke through outside the local area.

GARDNER: What about within the department?

ACKERMAN: When I came, there were three people: Walter Horn, who did medieval art; Otto Maenschen, who did Asian art; and Darryl Amyx, who did ancient art. Amyx had been a California undergraduate and graduate. And then I constituted the fourth, and, shortly after, Herschel Chipp was brought in to do nineteenth and twentieth century. So while I was there, it expanded, I think, only by one to include Jürgen Schulz, who is now at Brown [University]. So it was a small outfit.

The whole operation had two rooms in the library. One room had slides, and the other room was the seminar room. And the slide room had these slide cabinets arranged so that there was a cubicle for each professor behind the cabinets. So it was a very simple operation. It was part of an art department in which painters and



sculptors were working, too.

It was characteristic of all land-grant colleges that an art department was established-- This goes back to the 1870s in the case of Berkeley and the legislation that envisaged art in a practical sense. It would provide mechanical drawing and design. And, of course, they evolved into art departments more or less the way they are today. Art history came into these land-grant colleges only because the artists began to have an awareness that there was a responsibility to give students an awareness of the past.

But also there was a political validity to it: the artists had a very hard time being understood by other academics, and, therefore, questions about their careers were being settled by people who didn't know how to deal with a person who had made paintings instead of writing books. So having colleagues who presumably understood this I think was initially helpful. But in Berkeley and in many places, the departments have split into two, something which I regret, because I learned so much from the artists. The union was time-consuming and contentious, because when you have a budget and you have to decide whether easels are more important than slide projectors, it's not very easy to do. So there was kind of an in-built conflict there, in addition to the in-built



conflict that arises because art historians' understanding of art is never like that of artists. But anyway, as long as I was there, they were together, and I ultimately had an office in the new building that was built for art and anthropology.

GARDNER: You've mentioned learning things from the artists by having that department. What kind of things, aside from the existence of abstract expressionism?

ACKERMAN: Well, just that. I mean, I would not otherwise have known what was going on in the work of the New York school if I hadn't had some help. I learned that the achievements of contemporary art had to be taken seriously.

GARDNER: Well, in that sense, did that have an impact on the way you looked at art?

ACKERMAN: I wrote a number of studies about looking at contemporary art and what kind of problems it raised. One piece that I did, I think in the fifties or early sixties, called "Abstract Art and the Critics" is the only thing that I've ever done that had a popular audience. It was published in Atlantic Monthly [October 1962, 73-78] and reprinted through Graham Gallery [Singer Corporation, American Journal 3 (1963): 199-208].

GARDNER: I'll make a note of that.

ACKERMAN: For me, a survey course always had that element



of art appreciation. I thought that people being introduced to art history ought not simply to know what happened when and to be able to recognize the names and use them, but ought to know why you look at something and what the difference between a good work and a less good one is. This raised issues of criticism that always occupied me, and occasionally I wrote something about it. These things never, I think, had validity in the field of criticism because they weren't practical criticism. They were kind of a theory of approach that was not oriented towards current practice and more in the past, although I frequently-- I mean, in the last piece I did of this nature ["Interpretation, Response: Toward a Theory of Art Criticism." In Theories of Criticism. With M. H. Abrams (1984)], which is the one published by the Library of Congress, I pointed out how what had happened in the art of the seventies had so upset the tradition of critical standards that the art historians couldn't continue to work with traditional presumptions. These were presumptions that works of art are made to be permanent and kept and owned, that they should be original, that their value is based on the degree of originality. So when people began to exhibit as new works photographs made from other photographs, we needed either a total reexamination of critical standards or a rejection of



everything that was going on. A lot of historians choose the latter, saying, "Well, it's not art after a certain point." I say in that article that every time a writer has said in the past that the latest art isn't art, he's been proven wrong.

GARDNER: You taught, then, the survey class. Did you also teach a specialized class in your area of interest?

ACKERMAN: I've neglected to say that I had a dual appointment. The other side of it was architecture.

William Wurster, who came to Berkeley from MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology] as dean--I don't know whether he collaborated with Horn in the appointment initially or whether, once Horn had made it, he asked if he could have half--asked me to start professional architectural history at the architecture school.

The school at that time had the same kind of teaching as the art department. There was an aged architect who showed slides in a lecture hall and had the students make drawings from the slides, and that was architecture history. And then they were supposed to memorize the picture book of Banister Fletcher [A History of Architecture], which was and still is, in its umpteenth edition, full of inaccuracies. I remember, at one point, I was appointed to criticize an exam set for professional qualification in history (a licensed architect has to show



a knowledge of history). And there were questions the answers for which were controlled by what was in Banister Fletcher. So the question for me was, what do you do if Banister Fletcher made a mistake and the student gives you that mistake?

GARDNER: How did you solve that?

ACKERMAN: I don't think I did. I just told the authorities that they should no longer use this source. But in the architecture school I was really starting out from scratch, and I set up what was ultimately standard everywhere--I don't think I initiated it, actually--a four-semester survey of architecture with ancient, medieval, Renaissance, and baroque, and nineteenth and twentieth century as the fourth semester. I got another professor after a little while, and we split the survey. And then I'd do seminars for architects.

GARDNER: How did you teach it to make it different?

ACKERMAN: The architecture history?

GARDNER: Yeah.

ACKERMAN: Well, since I was an architectural historian, I think the only adjustments that I would make would be to pay more attention to what would be of interest to them, namely, how things were built and structural issues, and then it became part of my own work to be concerned with patronage and the social context of the building. But if



the art department had wanted to initiate a course in architectural history, I don't think that it would have been very different from what I did for the architects. Later, I continued to teach architects. I now have, in a class of fifty, forty from the architecture school.

GARDNER: Oh. Was the whole four semester series required as part of the requirement?

ACKERMAN: Yes.

GARDNER: So you had a captive audience for two years.

ACKERMAN: Yes. That's not always so good. And in that time, when Wurster came and brought in a whole new group of faculty members and they turned towards International-style modernism, then there was a wave of revulsion against history--they didn't need history, according to the doctrine. [Walter] Gropius at Harvard was an enemy of history, and there were Gropius students at Berkeley. So the students could be very reluctant and difficult to arouse, so it was nicer to have a seminar, in which you could get them going.

But anyway, that began the whole thing, and now Berkeley has its own history faculty with four or five people in it, among them one of my students.

GARDNER: Who's that?

ACKERMAN: Stephen Tobriner, who has, oddly enough, through his interest in San Francisco architecture and the



like--he's also a San Franciscan from the same kind of background as mine--become a world expert on earthquake building, which is not usual for historians.

GARDNER: You mentioned the seminars. What did you teach in the seminars? What sorts of things would you have covered?

ACKERMAN: I didn't too often, because I had graduate students to take care of in the art department. I don't remember what I taught.

GARDNER: Let's switch over to the art department, then. What were your teaching responsibilities in there?

ACKERMAN: Well, I think they had a system where you would do two lectures one semester and one lecture and a seminar in the other semester. But then there were a lot of graduate students, mostly people who didn't finish. I had only four Ph.D.'s, as I recall, while I was there, because art history was not a field that most people had ever heard of. And also the whole economic situation was different. The university had a lot of students who couldn't afford to go through to the Ph.D.'s. And it was exceedingly difficult to find the ways of getting these people abroad to do research, although the four that I'm thinking of all did Renaissance subjects. One of them worked on drawings that were in California. But Berkeley has always, until quite recently, had a graduate program



in art history that wasn't competitive with the eastern seaboard. And that's one of the reasons that I left. I mean, my departure for Harvard was largely determined by the advantages to me to being where there were more museums, exhibitions, and libraries, and the advantage in having students who were more selected.



TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE TWO

APRIL 22, 1991

GARDNER: Since one of the governing factors of both your interest and the interest of this project is teaching methodology, more or less, was there one at Berkeley that was identifiable? I mean, we've talked a little bit about your professors at Yale and George Kubler and so on, and then, of course, NYU and the strong nature of the Institute [of Fine Arts] and the way that teaching went on there. Was there an overarching style?

ACKERMAN: Well, I think it was the characteristic style. As I've explained, it was a period of no activity theoretically and was, therefore, a rather positivist approach to historical issues. I think the determining factor at that time, where you're in a very primitive situation with respect to the development of learning, was to have a professional level, particularly in graduate work, to turn out students who would meet the mark of others. And I think of the four students I described, three of them certainly did. The one who didn't go abroad and who worked on California material was not one of the ones I was proud of, but there wasn't much I could do about it.

GARDNER: Who were the other three?

ACKERMAN: One, Horst Delacroix, had most of his career at



San Jose State [University] and is a coauthor of a widely used text-- [tape recorder off] Delacroix did a couple of important articles on military architecture of the Renaissance and then disappeared into California bliss, I guess, and retired before I did. But, actually, I think he was a couple of years older than I when he was a student. Another, Carol Brentano, married a professor of history there and continued as a private scholar--hadn't taught very much, but has also published good stuff. The third was Helen Roberts. Shortly after she finished, her husband had a stroke which paralyzed him to a large extent, and she was completely occupied taking care of him but did some work. And in the last two years, I struggled to put her last paper into publishable condition. And after doing the best I could, it was rejected for publication. I was unhappy, but I understood the reasons, because some of the key points were missing. So that's all I remember. There may have been some other people, but I don't know that they finished under my supervision.

GARDNER: How about your fellow faculty? Could you describe them for me, what they were like?

ACKERMAN: Walter Horn was a very colorful, sociable person who found his home in San Francisco society and at one point was a trustee of the [M. H. de] Young [Memorial]



Museum and got around everywhere--very genial. I'm sure he's still charming people at eighty-seven. He had a great passion for working on Dark Ages wooden architecture and its relation to the great cathedrals and published a fascinating book on the plan of Saint Gall [The Facade of Saint Gilles], a surviving plan of a ninth-century monastery. And he encountered a cloud of suspicion because, being a German Aryan and working on wood architecture, he made the German scholars think that he must be suspect politically, because that subject, you see, was an authorized and approved Nazi subject since it had to do with the fatherland and all of that. Well, I'm totally convinced that there was nothing suspicious about it, that he was very honestly fascinated with it for the reason that it is fascinating. He also published a book [The Barns of the Abbey of Beaulieu] on a barn in England which is the oldest example of large-scale timber construction. And he collaborated with a marvelous draftsman, who was an architecture colleague of mine, Ernest Born. These books are just gorgeous for the way in which they reconstruct the buildings.

Otto Maenschen was really very much the same kind of German scholar as my teachers in New York: very high level of investigation, control of many languages, and the like. He was a very good person. Darryl Amyx was much



more provincial and had a limited background, having been at Berkeley for all of his education and not having had an opportunity for extensive excavation experience and the like.

GARDNER: Did he remain there at Berkeley?

ACKERMAN: Yes. So you can understand that they weren't attracting students from outside of California at this time because of the small faculty. The resources were good enough. I wrote my book on Michelangelo [The Architecture of Michelangelo (1961)] while I was there. And with not too frequent use of interlibrary loan, I was able to find books there or to acquire them. I did a lot of work, as we all did, to build up the library. It was a major part of our obligation. And the university was relatively well off in spite of Ronald [W.] Reagan at the time.

GARDNER: No, Ronald Reagan wasn't there yet.

ACKERMAN: Well, at the end I think he was.

GARDNER: Yes, probably. I'm interested-- Well, I was going to get to the Michelangelo book later, but I'll mention it, because it's remarkable that you were able to do all that just with materials that you got at Berkeley.

ACKERMAN: Well, I was also working on it when I visited Harvard in '58-'59. So it wasn't all--

GARDNER: But no more trips to Italy? You didn't do a run



through there?

ACKERMAN: Well, I may have visited one summer.

GARDNER: Okay. Well, I'll get back to that. Was Michelangelo your principal research work, then, when you went out to Berkeley?

ACKERMAN: No. I don't think I started that until the end of my years there. What I principally did then was to make pieces of work that I'd done in Italy into articles: an article, "Architectural Practice in the [Italian] Renais-sance" [Journal of the Society of Architectual Historians 13, no. 3 (1954): 3-11], which came out of my work with the drawings at the Uffizi [Gallery]; then an article on the architect Vignola ["Vignoliana," in Essays in Memory of Karl Lehmann], which came out of my discovery of a group of draw-ings in Siena showing projects that had not otherwise been known. On that I collaborated with Wolfgang Lotz, who had come to teach at NYU at a later date. Wolfgang was about five years older than myself. Well, I'd have to look over the bibliography to see if it was true that they were all done in California. Well, I did publish the first of the articles in which I dealt with criticism. About two years after I arrived, I was asked to become editor of the Art Bulletin. I was pretty young to be doing that, so it was an honor.

GARDNER: How did you happen to be asked?

ACKERMAN: Well, they have a board, and every so often



they select a new editor. I think it was a three-year term. In those days, it wasn't as big a job as it is now. I think we had in the neighborhood of seventy submissions a year, and now they have hundreds, to the extent that the Bulletin now has to pay half of the editor's salary to the editor's university in order for him or her to have time for editing. In 1955 or '56, at the annual meeting of the College Art Association, the keynote speaker got sick and pulled out, and, at the last minute, they asked me to say something. I gave a talk about what was wrong with the way art history was being done, and that became one of the publications of that period ["On American Scholarship in the Arts." College Art Journal 17 (1958): 357-62].

GARDNER: What was wrong?

ACKERMAN: I'd have to read the article. Well, mostly what was wrong was that everybody was publishing just the facts that they had discovered, that they were very reluctant to interpret, and that they didn't involve themselves in the context of the works of art. Well, I guess the argument was refined later on when I did the art history portion of the book Art and Archaeology [1963].

GARDNER: Art and Archaeology, right. So that was an interest of yours all along. You were sitting there, and while you were doing all these other things, your Renaissance work, you were also making mental notes about



what you thought was wrong with the state of the art.

ACKERMAN: Yes, I think that's right.

GARDNER: You began with Art Bulletin as associate editor. Was that just a--?

ACKERMAN: Everybody serves a year apprenticeship and moves into the saddle by steps. The last year that an editor is in charge, the associate is given the manuscripts that come in.

GARDNER: Did you have a relationship with the editor? How did that work? I know the editor was Carson Webster from Northwestern [University].

ACKERMAN: Well, we corresponded and talked by phone a little about issues that came up. Not much, otherwise.

GARDNER: So when you became editor, then, your responsibility, really, was the review of the manuscripts.

ACKERMAN: Well, first of all, whether to take them or not, and then when they were taken, to go through them to see that they were adequately written. Mostly I would send manuscripts to experts. There's an editorial board which is selected in order to cover the fields of submission. If I got an article on pre-Columbian art, I would send it to George Kubler for a judgment of whether it was to be accepted, and, when I got it back, usually with some commentary, then it had to go out to the author and say that the reader had asked that you alter certain



parts. Then, when it came back to me again, I'd go through it for just normal editing, get the punctuation, match the style of the Bulletin, and correct all that scholarly garbage--not all of it, because that would be impossible, but as much as possible--and then deal with the publisher and the people who did the illustrations. At that time, we were working with a mode of illustration that's called collotype, which is hardly used at all anymore. It became more expensive as time went on; it's a labor-intensive kind of work. It has great accuracy in detail, but it wasn't really the best thing for painting and images with a lot of tonal character, because it was almost too analytic a mode of reproduction. But it could do an extraordinarily good job if we had good copy, and that wasn't always the case. But we were working with the Meriden Gravure Company. There was a wonderful person in charge of it who preserved a nineteenth-century craftsmanship.

GARDNER: Where was it printed?

ACKERMAN: I think they printed it all there at Meriden, Connecticut.

GARDNER: Was there a staff as well as some--?

ACKERMAN: Yes. We had, I think, a part-time editor who was also working for the Princeton [University] Press--I mean, for the technical part of it.



GARDNER: What was your relationship to the board? Did that give you the opportunity to make lots of new contacts and friends?

ACKERMAN: No, because we only got together once a year at the annual meetings. The board at that time was an all-star cast of the best people that could be found.

GARDNER: I know. I have the list. It's pretty stunning.

ACKERMAN: The Bulletin changed radically from that time to now. At the time I was editor, it was primarily the place where the leading scholars would publish. It went through changes to the point that it became the place where young scholars tried to get themselves established, so that today, on the whole, I think the senior figures in the field tend to leave the field open to the young and publish elsewhere.

GARDNER: Or did they publish less?

ACKERMAN: Well, yes, I think there is certainly less article publication than there was then.

GARDNER: I noticed that the board members included [Richard] Krautheimer, [Karl] Lehmann, Walter Friedlaender, George Kubler. Do you think that helped you get the editorship?

ACKERMAN: No doubt. [laughter] Yes, I'm sure.

GARDNER: Should I go through the board members, so that you can tell me if there are any others whom you got to



know better, or with whom you later developed some kind of--? I'll just run through. Name lists are very helpful to oral historians. Alfred [H.] Barr [Jr.] is, alphabetically, first.

ACKERMAN: Well, I knew Alfred Barr better later on. He was a very important figure in art history because of his early awareness of modernism and his essential role in the foundation and policy of the Museum of Modern Art.

Through Alfred Barr, at a later time, I, at one moment, I believe--although I couldn't verify it--was a leading candidate for the directorship of the Museum of Modern Art. I was interviewed, ostensibly for my opinion of other candidates, and before anything further happened, I wrote a letter saying that I don't know whether they had been thinking of me, but I wouldn't be interested. In fact, the person who got the job lasted eight months and was destroyed by the experience.

GARDNER: Ludwig Bachhofer?

ACKERMAN: I didn't know him at all. He was a Chicago professor who taught Asian art.

GARDNER: Virgil Barker, Miami?

ACKERMAN: No. A museum person. I didn't know him.

GARDNER: Harry Bober?

ACKERMAN: Harry Bober was a student with me at NYU and studied medieval manuscripts. We were pals at school, and



later on he became very jealous of everybody else in the field and would put people off, and I couldn't really deal with him. Much later, his son [Jonathan P. Bober] became a student at Harvard, and I had discussions with him.

GARDNER: Oh, that's nice.

ACKERMAN: And I kept up with his wife [Phyllis Pray Bober], whom he divorced. She was an ancient art historian and graduate dean at Bryn Mawr [College].

GARDNER: Kenneth J. Conant?

ACKERMAN: He was at Harvard, and he was what you would call a medieval archaeologist. He excavated at Cluny, and his life was Cluny. It was a very important monastery that was rebuilt three times, so that it covers the whole Middle Ages. But he came out of a very different background. I'd like to know something about his history. He was Harvard all the way along, and he may have been trained as a historian, because I think it seems unlikely that he would have taken an art history degree, given his age. He also taught in the architecture school at Harvard. And he had a big run-in with Gropius and [William] Hudnut, Hudnut being the dean when Gropius was the chairman of architecture. I think that this caused him great pain, and I don't know whether he then focused on teaching in the fine arts department at Harvard. Anyway, he made a mark in that specialized area.

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GARDNER: Well, if you have to specialize, it's not so bad to do it at the corner of [Boulevard] Saint-Germain and Boulevard Saint-Michel. We talked about Walter Friedlaender last time, so I won't go into too much more detail about him. Lloyd Goodrich?

ACKERMAN: I didn't know Lloyd Goodrich. He was certainly the leading historian of American art at that time, known for monographs on Homer and other major painters. I think he directed the Whitney [Museum of American Art] early in the Whitney's history, when it was down on Eighth or Tenth Street.

GARDNER: Julius Held.

ACKERMAN: Julius Held, who is still very much alive and active in his eighties, living up in Bennington, Vermont, was a European. I'm not sure he was German; I guess maybe. But he came to this country maybe-- Well, being slightly younger than the NYU faculty, he may have just been at the end of his student years, and immediately was employed at Barnard [College] and taught at Barnard all his career and was a very distinguished historian of Netherlandish art, mostly of the baroque period, Rubens and so on.

GARDNER: I guess we can skip George Kubler. We already talked about him.

ACKERMAN: Well, we spoke of him before. One very



important thing about George's work in respect to me is that at the time that I published Art and Archaeology, with one chapter about the nature of style, he also published a book which had an enormous impact which is called The Shape of Time, which was a more radical work than mine and attracted great attention, because it applied anthropological and archaeological thinking, tried to avoid any implication of aesthetics in discussing the role of style, and tried to place the work of art in the same category as the artifact, to remove the differentiation between the two. But then there were a lot of very subtle additional thoughts.

It struck me that the way in which he and I described what started a particular style growing was remarkably similar to what Tom [Thomas S.] Kuhn, who was a colleague of mine at Berkeley, described in his famous book on scientific revolutions [The Structure of Scientific Revolutions]. They were all published in 1962, and it is really astonishing that this sudden redefinition of what moves things in intellectual history should be essentially the same in three new books which definitely were written in isolation from one another.

The sixties, the early sixties, were a tremendous period of ferment and innovation intellectually. It was the moment of system theory, and a scientist named [Ludwig



von] Bertalanffy had a considerable impact on the humanities with his system theory. And I remember [Percy W.] Bridgman, the physicist at Harvard, being a very important influence on the way I was looking at things. On top of that, there were lots of gettings-together of people in different disciplines to talk about the organization of learning. I found it enormously exciting and so vastly different from the present situation. I grant that the preoccupations of literary theory crossed into our field and others, but not by virtue of us all getting together and working on the same thing, as we did in the early sixties.

GARDNER: That's very interesting. I want to talk more about that later when we go through your book Art and Archaeology and also the articles.

Did you maintain a good friendship with George Kubler over the years?

ACKERMAN: Yes, yes. I don't think we ever arranged to get together, but we always had cordial interactions when we did.

GARDNER: Charles Kuhn.

ACKERMAN: He was a colleague at Harvard whom I only got to know when I went there. A very wonderful, warm person who built up the Busch-Reisinger Museum [of Northern European Art] there and developed the incredible



collection of twentieth-century German art, which nobody paid attention to at all in this time. I'm sure he was able to do this at a much lower price than would have been possible for other European art, partly as a result of the two wars and the anti-German sentiment. He just quietly worked away and bought a part of the Bauhaus archive and wonderful expressionist paintings as well as historical Netherlandish and German paintings. He was called "Cocky." He never published much and was always a recessive person, but a wonderful, warm colleague. I think he was chairman at the time when I first went to Harvard.

GARDNER: Dorothy Miner.

ACKERMAN: I didn't know her too well. She was an expert in medieval manuscripts who was the curator at the Walters Art Gallery and one of the very few women at that time who cracked the male fortress--not in academia significantly.

GARDNER: Okay, let me go through some of these others--

ACKERMAN: When I first became chairman at Harvard, if we wanted to hire a new person in the department, I just telephoned the graduate schools that I thought were most productive and asked, "Who are the best men you've got?"

GARDNER: Okay. I'll continue on my list of people.

Sirarpie der Nersessian.

ACKERMAN: She was at Wellesley [College] and did

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Byzantine art. This was a time when there wasn't much going in Byzantine art. It was taught at Princeton [University] primarily; I don't think we had anything at Harvard. I think she worked on manuscripts. Well, I didn't really know her.

GARDNER: Robert Goldwater.

ACKERMAN: Robert Goldwater taught modern at NYU. I think he was there at the time that I was. And he was really, alongside Meyer Schapiro, the person who taught the most people who later taught nineteenth- and twentieth-century art.

GARDNER: George Hanfmann?

ACKERMAN: George Hanfmann was at Harvard. He was a German refugee who was younger than the other group, and I think he did his Ph.D. at Harvard. He'd had his earlier education in Germany. He was extraordinarily productive as a teacher of people doing both archaeology and history of ancient art. He taught in the classics department, the people who were doing classical archaeology, and then he taught art history in the Department of Fine Arts. He had an excavation at Sardis which he initiated and which is still going on after about twenty-five years. It has lots of layers, from Lydian to late Roman and early medieval. And he trained a lot of people on the site there and was a very vigorous fund-raiser. He also was



curator of classical collections and acquired some good things for the Fogg Art Museum. A very fine colleague and a person for whom I have great respect. I think he probably had some of the same kind of impact on students as Lehmann. A very strong disciplinarian and so on.

GARDNER: G. Haydn Huntley. He was at Northwestern according to this.

ACKERMAN: I don't have a very clear picture of him. He was not much of a scholar. I think he was a figure within the field, in the politics of art history.

GARDNER: And--though I shouldn't make editorial comments--now the wealthiest art historian: H. W. [Horst Woldemar] Janson.

ACKERMAN: Well, he unfortunately died early. Well, in the fifties he had not begun writing The History of Art. He was certainly Mr. Art History of his period. There's always a Mr. Art History, a person who's in touch with absolutely everybody and everything and to whom everybody goes if they want to know whether somebody's good or not. It's now Henry Millon, director of the Center for the Advanced Study of Visual Art in the National Gallery of Art, I would say, because one's position has a lot to do with whether one can wield power. Janson was interested in holding all the strings, and I think this damaged his scholarship. But, on the other hand, he was hung up



between the two poles of the field, doing minute research on the one hand-- Which produced his book on Donatello [The Sculpture of Donatello], but it's like the catalog of a book to which he never wrote the text. It's an invaluable resource, but there's not a word of general assessment and interpretation. And then, on the other hand, the History of Art and the History of Art for Young People-- Well, also, in the German tradition, he did the book Apes and Ape Lore in the Middle Ages [and the Renaissance]. He certainly made his mark as a scholar.

GARDNER: Was he at NYU when you were there?

ACKERMAN: He taught downtown, but not during my period there. He was at Washington University in Saint Louis at that time.

GARDNER: I see.

ACKERMAN: He was like George Hanfmann. He was a German refugee who I think also did his Ph.D. at Harvard. Then he married an art historian. Everybody knew Peter Janson.

GARDNER: Next is Helene Kantor. She was at the University of Chicago.

ACKERMAN: She may have been in some very esoteric field. And incidentally, you notice, right up to the present day, that women are more likely to be found in fields that are eccentric from the point of view of the canon. For



example, the women at Harvard now are in Greek art--which isn't exactly eccentric--and ancient Mesopotamian, Byzantine, Islamic. It's much rarer that the women get appointments in Western, medieval or Renaissance art.

GARDNER: The men have it all locked up.

ACKERMAN: Yes.

GARDNER: Ruth Kennedy.

ACKERMAN: She was at Smith [College]. She did Renaissance art. She was relatively lightweight as a scholar, but a very engaging person. I think that she was a person who was probably there to represent the women's colleges, not exclusively for her value as a critic of manuscripts.

GARDNER: Ulrich [A.] Middeldorf.

ACKERMAN: Middeldorf was at [University of] Chicago. I guess he belonged to the same generation as Krautheimer and was very much focused in Florence and connected with the German institute there [Kunsthistorisches Institut] and published often in its journal. He worked on Renaissance sculpture and had a very focused factual approach to things, but then developed theories alongside relating to the development of styles and the like. Not abstract theories, but theories within that area of early Renaissance sculpture. He was definitely a world authority in that area, but I don't think that he left



very much in terms of ideas to art history. And I think he was probably quite hard to study under, because he didn't have followers. Seymour Slive at Harvard was a student of his, and it may be that only people with the capacity for an incredible amount of intense work could have been a Middeldorf student.

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APRIL 22, 1991

GARDNER: In the interest of progress, we'll continue for this brief time. Let's see, we did Dorothy Meyer already. Agnes Mongan?

ACKERMAN: Oh. She's at Harvard [University], too, still. She must be mid-eighties or older and had been the associate director of the museum [Fogg Art Musuem] and is an expert on drawings. Harvard has a fabulous collection of drawings which was largely assembled by Paul Sachs, who was an amateur who had money from a big Wall Street family. He was bought out, I believe, as [Aby] Warburg had been in Hamburg and London, by wealthy brothers. He didn't want to go into the business, and he then became an expert connoisseur, particularly of drawings, and bought, with extraordinary discrimination, a wide-ranging collection of drawings. He trained people in connoisseurship at Harvard and gave a famous museum course, which had not very much in it, as far as I could see, but it was considered to be a path to museum directorships. Fifteen, twenty years ago, almost all the museum directors across the country had come out of that course. Agnes was his associate and later became acting director of the Fogg Museum-- maybe even director, I can't remember--but steadily worked and published on drawings. I think she won a lot of



respect and also is the kind of person held back by the bias against women.

GARDNER: Jakob Rosenberg.

ACKERMAN: Also Harvard. There was a heavy Harvard representation. Well he then, after Sachs, was brought from Germany to become curator of prints and drawings at the Fogg Museum. He published in Dutch and Flemish painting, did a fine book on Rembrandt [Rembrandt], and was a real force in the field. Because of his museum specialty, he represented more the connoisseur side than Julius Held did.

GARDNER: Sumner Crosby.

ACKERMAN: Sumner Crosby was a Yale [University] medievalist who-- Well, I suppose he really worked in the tradition of Marcel Aubert in medieval archaeology and excavated at Saint-Denis and published a couple of books on Saint-Denis. His career was a little like that of [Kenneth J.] Conant's: focused on one object. Sumner was a very rich and self-indulgent person and never could get himself to work very hard, but he was very pleasant. I imagine I had a course with him when I was an undergraduate. See, he was one of the team that was hired all at once, a twenty-eight-year-old who started a department at Yale in the late thirties.

GARDNER: Richard Ettinghausen.



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ACKERMAN: He was a major expert on Islamic art who later came to [Institute of Fine Arts] NYU [New York University] and was really the figure in the field. For a long time, anybody who wanted to do Islamic would have to work with him, because there wasn't anybody else. Later Oleg Grabar, my former colleague at Harvard who's now at the Institute for Advanced Study [Princeton University], shared this unique position.

GARDNER: Henry-Russell Hitchcock.

ACKERMAN: Russell I took a course with on nineteenth-century architecture on my return to NYU. He was a really flamboyant character of enormous proportions: he wrote a book on H. H. Richardson [The Architecture of H. H. Richardson and his Times], and he had a figure exactly like Richardson's, extremely corpulent. He just spoke in explosions, and he really is the father of the study of modern architecture in America. In 1932, together with Philip Johnson, he wrote a book called The International Style, long before anybody had built a building in modernist vocabulary in the U.S., covering the tradition of Le Corbusier and Dutch modernists, and Mies van der Rohe was introduced to America in this book. There was another book of Hitchcock, I think just called Modern Architecture, at that period, and his influence was right away injected into the Museum of Modern Art. So he was a



fountainhead for this study. He had many students who went off in all directions from his teaching. His headquarters was Smith College, but he did graduate courses at NYU and Yale. I think he was the main influence on Vincent Scully, who then took his position as the head person in modern architecture.

Hitchcock had some kind of run-in with the Harvard fine arts faculty. He never got his Ph.D. He was either thrown out or his work was rejected, which is ridiculous, because, at his time, he was probably the most distinguished product that Harvard had produced. Later on, when I was chairman [of the Department of Fine Arts], we tried to get an honorary degree for Russell, but failed. I don't think we failed because they didn't approve of Russell, but because getting an honorary degree at Harvard for anybody in the art field is an infrequent thing, or certainly was then.

GARDNER: That's very funny. Ernst Kitzinger.

ACKERMAN: He also was later a colleague of mine at Harvard. At the time, he may have been at Princeton.

GARDNER: I have Dumbarton Oaks.

ACKERMAN: Oh, yes. Well, that's Harvard, too. He was at Dumbarton Oaks a long time, and then we persuaded him to move up. He was also of German origin, a leading person in Byzantine art, and a very devoted scholar--always



thought he didn't know how to teach but taught wonderfully. He produced many students, and when he retired from Harvard, he went to live in Oxford and works there.

GARDNER: Alexander Soper.

ACKERMAN: In oriental, Asian art. Soper was at Bryn Mawr [College] and was certainly one of the stars in the field. It's interesting because this list has on it, aside from a few people who were selected for reasons of representation, the most productive people of that moment.

GARDNER: I haven't gone into [Richard] Krautheimer and [Karl] Lehmann and [Erwin] Panofsky--

ACKERMAN: I don't think [Meyer] Schapiro's there.

GARDNER: No, Schapiro is not.

ACKERMAN: But I think maybe he had served or didn't want to. Schapiro was never much for the art historical establishment.

GARDNER: I have three more that came on at the end of your term. Maybe they may not even be worth going into in detail, but since you're doing such a nice job of giving me this historiography of teachers-- George [Heard] Hamilton, who of course you mentioned, because he was one of your young teachers.

ACKERMAN: He was one of the group at Yale. All the way through George's career, he worked on late nineteenth-



century French painting. He was very much of a bon vivant, not an intense scholar, but everything he did-- although it wasn't very much--has a certain polish to it. He did write the Pelican history of Russian art [The Art and Architecture of Russia], which he got into late in his career. I think he did some text on the painting of the nineteenth century. But he was, like other members of his department, independently wealthy. He was a bachelor at the time I was there, and he had an apartment in one of the colleges and wonderful works of art in his own collection. Then he became director of the Clark [Art] Institute in Williamstown. He married one of his students.

GARDNER: John [R.] Martin.

ACKERMAN: More or less a contemporary of mine, did Flemish painting, and would have overlapped completely with Held. I suppose Held was going out--

GARDNER: I think so.

ACKERMAN: --so they brought Martin in. Well, at that time, in the mid-fifties, he wouldn't really have been established. He had a steady output. He didn't do any earthshaking work. He worked on Rubens, wrote a very useful book about baroque art [Baroque, Style and Civilization] for the classroom. He, incidentally, was the subject of an oral history profile by the Rutgers Art



Review in the issue before the one in which I had been. I think he was a paradigmatic Princeton professor of that period when there was a kind of Princeton tradition. You couldn't get into the department unless you'd been an undergraduate and so on, with exceptions made for foreigners.

GARDNER: The last one I have is Hans Swarzenski.

ACKERMAN: Hans was a wonderful, smarmy Viennese of the Strauss waltz school who was the curator of medieval art at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and had wonderful discrimination in his acquisitions, with the exception of, at the very end of his career, becoming involved along with Perry Rathbone [then director] in a very shady acquisition of a Raphael that wasn't a Raphael. But he certainly was a great asset to the museum. He rarely taught, and he didn't do a lot of writing, but he was somebody to whom a lot of people turned for judgments. I don't know how he operated in bringing up younger people through his department. I couldn't say that.

GARDNER: Well, that's all the board names I have. Actually, on a separate sheet that I didn't bring along, I have all the foreigners, but I think we'll skip them and maybe come back to them on some future day.

ACKERMAN: The foreigners? How do you mean?

GARDNER: There was an international board, as well.



ACKERMAN: Oh. I'd forgotten about that.

GARDNER: What were the roles of these boards? You mentioned that they met once a year.

ACKERMAN: No, actually, the annual meeting is of the board of former editors, which had to do with fixing policy and electing new editors. That was recently eliminated because it was so patently self-perpetuating. So now, for the first time since 1954, I'm not on the Art Bulletin's masthead. [laughter] They were just there as resources for the editor to turn to.

GARDNER: I see. But it also is very impressive to have those names.

ACKERMAN: Yes. I think the ex-editors probably helped more than the editorial board because, if I would get an article on a particular subject, I would send it to the person I thought was best able to judge it and not necessarily board members. It's a duty that people in the field just accept. For me, it still goes on. I've read two manuscripts for the current editor this year. You can always find someone who is close to the material.

GARDNER: You started to talk about the Michelangelo book [The Architecture of Michelangelo (1961)], and I interrupted you. What prompted you to work on Michelangelo?

ACKERMAN: [Rudolf] Wittkower and [Anthony] Blunt were the



editors in chief of a series [Studies in Architecture] that a London editor, Desmond Zwemmer, initiated of monographs and architects. So it was their duty to dragoon colleagues into writing volumes in this series. I think it's still continuing, or it did until recently. There are probably twenty volumes now. So they asked me to take on the Michelangelo volume. Fortunately, I was naive enough to-- I didn't know what I'd done. It was an incredible task, because the literature was enormous, and just reading for Saint Peter's must have taken two or three months. Very difficult, too. I mean, the kind of scholarship that had been done was so specific and intricate that unraveling it, particularly if it were in German, which most of it was, was a sweat. It must have been particularly hard on the family.

Part of the period of doing it was hard on the family in another way--that I went to Harvard as a visiting faculty member. I think Sydney [J.] Freedberg was on leave, and they didn't have anybody in the Renaissance. I came in '58-'59 without any intention of any further commitment. A friend found us a house near hers in a little suburban settlement, in Weston, which was a half-hour commute. And this was very isolating for Mildred [Rosenbaum Ackerman]. It was a tough time for her. That I should have been working on Michelangelo at the same



time must have made everybody in the family unhappy.

The Michelangelo book was schizophrenic, with one volume that deals in a freewheeling way with the interpretation of Michelangelo's buildings and a second volume that picks its way through every drawing and document and tries to make sense out of masses of uncoordinated material, a tremendous length. It's in very small print, and it must be 250 pages. In later editions, the catalog is abridged, and that simplified matters a good deal. But in terms of technique, I think, it was relatively original in the way that it handled the relationship between text and catalog and the analytic approach to a catalog.

GARDNER: The blurb on one of the later editions, which is the one that I ran across--hopefully one of the abridged ones--talked about certain attributions that you were able to correct and so on. Were there any of those that stand out? And how you found them and how you cleared them up? If there aren't-- I mean, we're talking thirty years ago, so you're to be forgiven if you don't recall them.

ACKERMAN: I just think that the attributions came out of close examination of the evidence. I don't think that I made any discoveries that proved that something was or wasn't by Michelangelo. There are some things that I



proposed that have been challenged since. There were some seventy-five additions to the bibliography in the second printing of the second edition, and that was a period of less than a decade. So it's an active field.

GARDNER: You won all kind of awards for it.

ACKERMAN: Both the College Art [Association] Charles Rufus Morey Award and the Society of Architectural Historians Alice Hitchcock Medal.

GARDNER: Right. That must have been tremendously gratifying. You're still a fairly young man at this point, with a--

ACKERMAN: I have a psychological debility, which is that when anything good happens to me, I think that somebody made a mistake, and when I won a prize or the like that I thought, "My God, what's wrong with this field that they can't find anybody better than me?" And I always feel that way. For example, I got the distinguished teaching award from the College Art Association this year. A couple of weeks ago, they sent me the letters that had been written in my behalf, thinking that I would enjoy perusing them, and I haven't read them yet. I have a real problem of this nature. It's necessary to me to feel that if I'm distinguished it's because everybody else is weak.

GARDNER: Isn't that one of Woody Allen's syndromes? Sounds sort of like it.



You mentioned the year at the Fogg. The next interesting year that I identified in your vitae was the year you spent at Princeton. Could you talk about how that came about?

ACKERMAN: Well, there was a classics professor there, Whitney Oates, who had something called something like the Council of the Humanities, and he had a project of producing one-volume overviews of each field in the humanities and allied disciplines, such as anthropology. So he brought there, in the course of three or four years, about four or five people at a time to write on a field and to describe what the field was and what was happening in it and where it was going. He asked me if I would come for that purpose. So on the way from California to Cambridge [Massachusetts], I spent a year in Princeton. We had bought a house in Cambridge at the end of our first stay at Harvard, because we were asked to stay in the middle of that year, and we found a nice house in Princeton. It was handy, because the kids could go to public school. I hated Princeton. It just wasn't my kind of place. It seemed very precious. The whole character of the town seemed to have the superficiality of that little central square there where everything was pseudo-colonial. I was not particularly affiliated to the department or to the Institute for Advanced Study and didn't really break in, in terms of



collegiality. But I had some interactions with the people who were working on the project: John Higham, who was doing a book on American history; "Joe" [Cesar L.] Barber was doing something in literature; and Rhys Carpenter, who wrote the archaeology part of our book [Art and Archaeology (1963)], who lived in the countryside near New Hope. But I had to work pretty intensively, because it meant doing a whole book in the course of a year. Well, actually, it wasn't the whole book--

GARDNER: Half a book.

ACKERMAN: Because I had half the book, yeah. But it went pretty smoothly.

GARDNER: You had no other responsibilities, then, other than--

ACKERMAN: Nothing.



TAPE NUMBER: V, SIDE ONE

MAY 13, 1991

GARDNER: As I mentioned, Richard [Cándida] Smith has reviewed the first two sessions. He had some questions, and I want to start off with those because we'll get them out of the way. Some of the questions he had I'm going to leave for later, because I think they will work better at the end. But he was particularly interested in a comment you made that said that Italians never exploited their riches. So here are the questions that arose from that seemingly innocent comment. First of all, did you see changes in Italian attitudes from the time you were in Italy the first time, in the late forties, till now? In their attitudes towards their cultural heritage?

ACKERMAN: Well, one major change is that, in the field of art history, a considerable number of scholars of international rank--I'm speaking particularly of architecture, a field that I'm most involved in--began to emerge who didn't have the same kind of limitations that the earlier ones had suffered from, principally language. In the generation before mine, architectural historians in Italy just didn't learn English and German, and soon the discipline got to the point at which you couldn't do a decent job without having those languages. Secondly, as the result of the heritage of [Benedetto] Croce, they

THE HISTORY OF THE CITY OF BOSTON

FROM THE FIRST SETTLEMENT
TO THE PRESENT TIME
BY
JOSEPH NEALE
OF THE BOSTON BAR
IN TWO VOLUMES
VOL. I.
BOSTON: PUBLISHED BY
J. NEALE, AT THE SIGN OF THE
"CROWN," CORNER OF
NASSAU AND NATHAN STREETS.
1845.

The history of the city of Boston, from the first settlement to the present time, is a subject of great interest and importance. It is a city which has been the seat of many of the most important events in the history of the United States, and which has played a prominent part in the development of the nation. The history of Boston is a history of struggle and sacrifice, of courage and heroism, and of the triumph of the principles of liberty and justice over the forces of oppression and tyranny. It is a history which should be read by every citizen of the United States, and which should be a source of inspiration and encouragement to all who are engaged in the struggle for the preservation and improvement of our country.

weren't interested in a "scientific" type of scholarship, either. Their work leaned towards criticism. The generation now in their forties and fifties is the highest level, and I consider that the most influential architectural historian in the world right now is Manfredo Tafuri at the University of Venice, where there is a large school of architectural historians. They have a substantial faculty there and several excellent people. So that's one of the major differences.

Now, it's a little different from what I was describing when I said they didn't exploit their riches. In the Crocean tradition (Croce, after all, wasn't an art historian but an aesthetician), people like Adolfo [Venturi] and Lionello Venturi were very powerful figures, and they did work which is on the borderline between criticism and history. One would have thought, under those circumstances, that, since their followers weren't spending time in the archives and in doing primary research, they would have been in the museums all the time. But in my student days, when I went into the Uffizi [Gallery] drawing cabinet, I never saw Florentines or other Italians working there regularly. I thought that this was because the works were so easy to get to that they didn't feel they had to study them carefully.

The materials were in terrible condition. I was very



shocked in Venice when I went, I think at a later period, to see the drawings of Leonardo-- In that case I wasn't working on architecture drawings. The terrible state they were kept in was also a sign of lack of involvement with the heritage. There was one case where I took a drawing out of the box and it wasn't even properly attached to its mount, and it either fell or almost fell to the floor. And that's not the kind of thing you want to have happen to a Leonardo drawing.

But while I can't think of anybody working on material other than architecture that moved into the forefront the way that Tafuri has, of that generation, there were some very outstanding scholars who broke new ground earlier, among whom I think of Giulio Claudio Argan, Federico Zeri, and Giuliano Briganti. Argan is in his mid-eighties, the other two perhaps a decade behind. Briganti has died.

GARDNER: Did you know Tafuri in the early days?

ACKERMAN: Not very early. Well, when I was first working in Italy he would have been too young. I guess he's about sixteen years younger than I am.

GARDNER: He would still have been in grammar school or thereabouts.

ACKERMAN: Yes.

GARDNER: What about the role of American institutions in



expanding the accessibility? Do you think they played an important part?

ACKERMAN: Which of the institutions? Abroad? Or in this country?

GARDNER: Well, I guess both. I guess both. I guess what I'm looking for--and, again, these are reactive questions, and I'll try to phrase them as well as I can--are the influences that helped to change that attitude.

ACKERMAN: Well, Germany had the leadership, certainly. I would think one of the major influences was the development of the Hertziana Library in Rome, which is an absolutely stunning library of Italian art and architecture and topography. Together with the library at the German Archaeological Institute in Rome, they're just unbelievably thorough, and with all kinds of cross-referencing, for example, indexing of periodicals, so that if you want to look up a given artist, apart from going to a card catalog and looking for the name of that artist, you have these volumes of indexes where every discussion of a given artist is recorded. And then [there are] photographs and all of the things to go with such organization and funding. While the American Academy in Rome has been helpful to scholars, its art history library is only moderately good, I think partly because it doesn't have to be superb given the fact that foreigners can use



the Hertziana. And there's another German institute in Florence [Kunsthistorisches Institut], as well, that serves the same productive purpose.

These institutions are also places where talented Germans get fellowships for extended periods. The better ones would stay for up to eight years, which is not something that one ever did in an American system. So there would be people who would be pursuing their very positivistic, scientific approach to things, and that may have had an influence. And, of course, they were publishing all the time in the Italian field, so that the Italians would read them. Then the American and British art history began to swing in the German direction, too, so that it exerted pressure, perhaps. The same thing didn't happen so much in France. The French went their own way.

GARDNER: What way was that?

ACKERMAN: Well, like the Italians at that time, they did only the art of their own nation. There was some work on Italian art happening in France--that's an exaggeration to say it was only French--and one of the leading people of my generation or a little older, André Chastel (recently deceased), was a specialist in Italian art, but in a French style, combining criticism and cultural history, and would not have moved the Italians onto a different



plane than they were on before. Also, intellectuals in postwar Italy were largely communist, and there may have been a sense that one had to reform history as well as society. The earlier tradition had a great deal to do with people's responses to works of art, particularly the Crocean tradition, and that seemed individualistic and self-indulgent. If you were a communist, you wanted to go in a direction of showing the economic and social base, which demanded hard work in archives to find out about patronage and social and economic factors. Some historians were also involved in politics. For example, Argan was elected the mayor of Rome on the communist ticket in the seventies, I think. He never had been a politician particularly, but there's great admiration for intellectuals there. Lionello Puppi was a senator from the Veneto.

GARDNER: Argan was older than you. Was he somebody you ran into in your early studies?

ACKERMAN: Yes. He was very helpful. I didn't see a lot of him, but he was a person for whom I had great admiration in a way that I do for [Meyer] Schapiro in this country. They're about the same age, and I had about the same relation with them, although less intimate with Argan.

GARDNER: Describe that relationship.



ACKERMAN: First of all, I valued seeing them to benefit from what they had to say about the field, but also just as homage to their importance.

GARDNER: Okay, another quote--this is one that I picked up from our last session--that an art historian's view of art is different from that of artists. This had to do with your working particularly at [University of California] Berkeley, but other places. Could you talk about that a little bit, about how art historians look at art and how artists look at art, how that differs?

ACKERMAN: Well, I think artists are interested in the concepts and the qualities of works of art, and they don't have to categorize them, and they're not concerned to put them into a framework. As an art historian, I went to museums with a concern about how I would fit what I was seeing into teaching or into some scheme that I was developing. Then there is the-- What's called scholarly objectivity is something which induces the scholar not to necessarily give priority to the things that he or she likes or thinks are good, but the scholar, in a sense, sees the work of art as a document of a process. Now, I think that there are limitations to scholarship, and, in a paper that I wrote a few years ago, I tried to set up two categories of investigation side by side: that of interpretation and that of what I called response. So



this responsibility to interpretation and the relatively lower categorization that response and interaction have in our academic approach, that's a difference. I would say it's a characteristic of this German-American scientific, positivist approach to things. The method of the French, for example, that I was trying to define, doesn't throw up obstacles between one's interaction with a work of art and one's dealing with it historically. I think that's the aspect that I got so much engaged with at the beginning of all of this with [Henri] Focillon.

GARDNER: It seems to me--and I'm much more distant from this than you are, so it's a reflection from afar--that artists today are much more aware of art history than they would have been forty-five, fifty years ago. I suppose part of that is due to the proliferation of art history around the country.

ACKERMAN: Well, it's also the self-consciousness of late twentieth-century art. Some of it's historically oriented in a new sense. I recently saw a piece by a conceptual artist who appropriates earlier art in which she takes a ready-made urinal that Duchamp exhibited in 1917, calling it Fountain, and extends it to three urinals, all gold plated. That's an extreme overexaggeration of the art in-joke. And it's characteristic of much that's happening today. I think many artists today are similarly removed



from interest in our capacity to grasp the qualities of a work of art in the sense I was talking about. As historians, they aren't dealing with a personal interaction or expression very much.

I felt at the academy in Rome that being with artists as well as historians was good. I used to go to museums with my artist friends there and would pick up a lot from seeing an artist speak about a work. And each artist, of course, is looking with a different perspective, because I think artists very frequently see the work of other artists in relation to something they're trying to achieve in their own work. So that would sensitize them to some aspect there that another person wouldn't see.

GARDNER: Okay. That covers the questions from the last-- We'll pick up some of those conversations, I suspect, before we go back.

Last time, I had a list of the people who were on the international committee [of the Art Bulletin]. I don't want to take too much time because I suspect some of them were there in a representative capacity rather than a participatory one. This is for Art Bulletin, your editorial years. So let me go through the names, and you can tell me if there's anything you want to say about them or if they had any influence on you or what their participation was in the Art Bulletin. Pardon my



pronunciation; I'll probably miss four or five of them along the way. The first one on the list was Diego Angulo-Iñiguez.

ACKERMAN: We wanted somebody representing different countries, and he was a very influential and prolific Spanish scholar. I don't know much about him, because I didn't work in that field.

GARDNER: Were you in touch with these people on a regular basis? Or did you just occasionally send them pieces?

ACKERMAN: No. These were honorary positions. They didn't come into the picture at all.

GARDNER: Okay. Should I keep going through the list?

ACKERMAN: Well, let's see if anybody looks interesting.

GARDNER: Okay. Jan Bialostocki?

ACKERMAN: Well, I was quite close to Bialostocki. He was a Polish scholar just my age who died about three years ago. I contributed a piece to his sixtieth birthday festschrift and a piece to his memorial volume. A very versatile and wide-ranging person who had exceptional privileges in Poland. He was the only art historian who was regularly allowed out with enough money to go anyplace. I've met a couple of other Poles. One came regularly to Italy to the meetings of the Center for Architectural History in Vicenza. But Bialostocki went wherever he could contribute anything. I think he served

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later on the International Commission for Art History. His work paralleled German work in that it dealt with western European art. He had a large vision, so that he wasn't limited by the positivism in the German school. Unfortunately, the people from behind the iron curtain at that time who wrote in western European languages so that we could read them almost never wrote about the art of their area, so that the understanding of that has lagged behind. There are still very few people who do anything with that.

GARDNER: Next one is Anthony Blunt.

ACKERMAN: Well, Anthony Blunt was a great mover. He was the editor of the series [Studies in Architecture] for which I wrote a book on Michelangelo [The Architecture of Michelangelo (1961)] together with [Rudolf] Wittkower, and he was head of the Courtauld Institute, which is the main training center for art history in Britain, and keeper of the queen's pictures. He was the most influential figure in England. Then when he became embroiled in a spy scandal, there was a tremendous controversy within the field, a little bit like that of Paul de Man recently in the literary field. But people owed so much to Blunt or admired his work so much that they couldn't bring themselves to be critical of his involvement in cloak-and-dagger stuff. I don't think that



he was as heavily involved as the others who were caught at the same time, but, nonetheless, it's conceivable that he played a part in activities that caused people in the intelligence service to lose their lives. But not a lot was proven. He was knighted for his service to the crown as the curator of the queen's pictures, and they removed his knightship. So he must have had a pretty unpleasant time in his last years, although I don't think he was incarcerated.

ACKERMAN: I don't think he was. André Chastel.

GARDNER: Well, I spoke of Chastel a moment ago, and he played a similarly powerful role in France, except that France, which is more hierarchical than England, really had a number-one art historian, and that was Chastel. Chastel's patronage was essential to progress in art history. He was at the Collège de France and an extremely genial person who was always very much in touch with the colleagues whom he met here and there. I kept in touch with him over the years. He was the last president of the center in Vicenza, of which I am a board member and go twice a year for the meetings, so I would see him there. In his later years, he tended to work on more general things, because he was so occupied with his various roles that he didn't have time for profound research.

GARDNER: Did the same tension exist with Chastel vis-à-



vis the German school as did with Focillon? Is that something that's been ongoing, that the French look at the world one way and the Germans another?

ACKERMAN: I think German scholars would dismiss somebody like Chastel because he wasn't what they call scientific. But then I, with all my German training, am still regarded by a lot of the Germans as a popularizer.

GARDNER: Congratulations, I guess. Next one on my list is L. M. J. Delaissé.

ACKERMAN: He died quite young, I think by suicide. He was a Belgian who specialized in manuscript illumination and did brilliant work and was really on the upgrade in his career at the time of his death. He was very devoted to his small children and then had a separation or divorce, and I think this undermined him. If he had survived that, he would have done more and more imaginative things, a very original scholar. He worked on the technical construction of books, which was important to progress in the study of manuscript, because it influenced decisions about what belonged and what didn't belong and what was the order of illustrations. That was a significant innovation.

GARDNER: Herbert von Einem.

ACKERMAN: Well, he was kind of the grand old man of German art history. He was something of a generalist,



which, as I've been explaining, is unusual in Germany. I don't think the Germans held him to be a great scholar, but I think he was the type of person that would represent Germany in all kinds of international activities.

GARDNER: J. G. van Gelder.

ACKERMAN: He worked in seventeenth-century Dutch art. I don't know that field very well, but I think [he made] a very substantial contribution.

GARDNER: Hans Robert Hahnloser?

ACKERMAN: Swiss, I think.

GARDNER: Yes.

ACKERMAN: I don't know much about his career in general. He was the publisher of a very important manuscript by a Gothic architect, Villard de Honnecourt, that is the only illustrated book of Gothic architecture done during the thirteenth century [The Sketchbook of Villard de Honnecourt]. I don't know if this work was parlayed into any fundamental contribution to knowledge. But he was an obvious choice if you wanted to have a representative from Switzerland.

GARDNER: Jiro Harada from Japan?

ACKERMAN: I don't know anything about him.

GARDNER: Obviously symbolic. Victor Lasareff?

ACKERMAN: Russian, very old at the time, and a person who came to prominence before the revolution, I think, and



managed to remain in favor and was a member of the Soviet academy.

GARDNER: Carl Nordenfalk?

ACKERMAN: He was a lot in America, several times at the Institute for Advanced Study [Princeton University]. Swedish, and he worked in medieval subjects. A really sharp person who did a lot of interesting new work. He had a professorship at Pittsburgh for a while, too. In Sweden, the scholars are at a real disadvantage for research materials; it's difficult for them to do research in a competitive way. I was asked by a colleague, Allan Ellenius, who is a very distinguished person a little younger than I in Sweden, to come and lecture for the Swedish universities quite a long time ago, some time in the seventies or eighties.

GARDNER: That's not that long.

ACKERMAN: So Mildred [Rosenbaum Ackerman] and I drove from Italy and made the trip by car through Sweden, which was fascinating. I liked it a lot. But I got a sense of those universities, and the research equipment is so much below the level of other Western nations that it's hard for them to work in the same way. So they tend to work on more general material. Ellenius has managed to have fellowships outside, at the Warburg Institute and elsewhere, that have helped him to do things of international



significance. Also, it's a great drawback, if you're trying to make a mark in international studies, to have to write in foreign languages. They're awfully good at them in Sweden; they usually publish in English and German. I can imagine that, even if you're pretty expert at foreign languages, it's a drag at the best to have to constantly do your publications in--

GARDNER: You almost have to be fluent in--

ACKERMAN: Yeah. Yeah, well, as a rule, they're either fluent in German or in English. And, of course, they know lots of languages. They're much better trained there than we are.

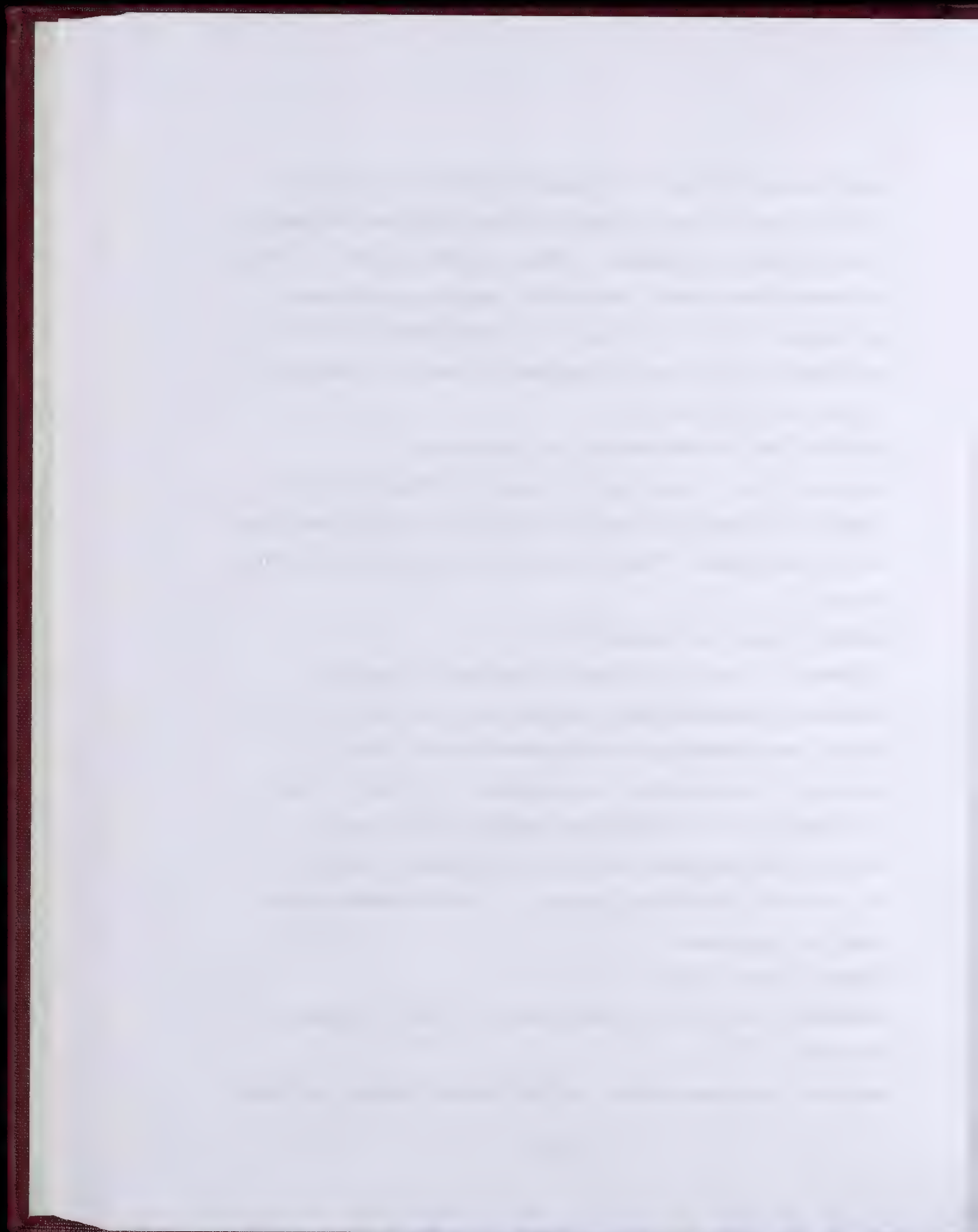
GARDNER: Rodolfo Pallucchini?

ACKERMAN: He was a Venetian who worked on Venetian Renaissance painting and a person who, like most of these others, had something of a representational role as involved in international interchange. I think he was a good scholar, but I think the choice of this group balanced the appreciation of the individual's work with the role that individual played. I noticed there are no women in this list.

GARDNER: That's right.

ACKERMAN: Well, that's very typical of the attitude at that time.

GARDNER: There were women in the American group, but none



in the international.

ACKERMAN: Well, of course, in the international scene not very many women would have been able to exercise this kind of representational role. They would have been suppressed. Although in Italy there were a number of fine women scholars. Some in England. In France, that came a little later.

GARDNER: The last one on the list is John Pope-Hennessy.

ACKERMAN: Who came to the States, ultimately. He was the curator of painting at the Metropolitan Museum [of Art]. And at the time, I think he was a curator of sculpture at the Victoria and Albert [Museum]. Pope-Hennessy comes as close as anybody to being the inheritor of the tradition of Bernard Berenson. He was a connoisseur, and, actually, one of his books, I think, is called The Study of Connoisseurship of Italian Sculpture. A very prolific writer. His major influence was in trying to straighten out who did what in Italian sculpture, which has been little studied and lags behind painting with respect to the definition of all the works that survive. And since there's perhaps less adequate documentation, it becomes very important to have people like Pope-Hennessy whose experience gives their judgments more authority than that of others. I mean, it's an area in which the typical methods of the German scholars don't help very much,



although the great expert on Italian sculpture, who did a lot in the first stages to clarify who did what, was Wilhelm Bode, a museum person. And one German refugee in this country taught Italian sculpture, Ulrich [A.] Middeldorf. I don't know if he was on the Art Bulletin committee at that time, but I'm sure he was at one time or another. He was the chairman at [the University of] Chicago, and my colleague Seymour Slive studied with him.

GARDNER: Okay. My list is done. Now, let me see what my next retrospective question was. We talked about your first year at Harvard [University], '58-'59. How were you recruited for that?

ACKERMAN: Sidney [J.] Freedberg, who taught Italian painting, had a leave, and they wanted to continue teaching Italian painting. So they just called me up.

GARDNER: Who called you? Do you recall? Who was it?

ACKERMAN: No. Maybe Sidney himself. I would say it was whoever was chairman at the time. In the Harvard system, you served as chairman for four years or so and then somebody else took it, so it wasn't a lifetime activity. Like everywhere else, Italian art had a kind of a special rank, whereas if somebody had gone on leave who taught ancient art or modern art, they might, at that time, have felt they could get along without for a year.



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GARDNER: You were affiliated with the Fogg [Art Museum]?
Was that the way it worked?

ACKERMAN: Well, the Fogg was just the place where the
Department of Fine Arts was.

GARDNER: Oh, I see.

ACKERMAN: In those days, the museum and the department
were very closely interrelated, and most of the curators
were members of the faculty.

GARDNER: What was the role of John Coolidge at this point?

ACKERMAN: He was director of the museum for twenty years.
I always regretted it, because John had the potential of
being a leading art historian, and the museum ate him up.
He continued to teach, and we taught together on a couple
of occasions; he was always challenging and original in
his approaches. If he had devoted himself exclusively to
scholarship, he would have made a great mark.

GARDNER: Did he have any role in getting you East, do you
know?

ACKERMAN: Well, as a member of the faculty, he would have
participated, and he would have been the person in the
faculty most competent to judge my work, because he'd been
publishing in Italian Renaissance architecture. So,

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whether or not he generated that thought, they would have turned to him for advice.

GARDNER: Now, you mentioned that it was in the course of that year, around the middle of the year, that they said to you they'd like to have you come back. How did Berkeley feel about that?

ACKERMAN: Well, I'm sure they were very disappointed. Berkeley had a little club of people who had turned Harvard down. They were very proud of this. One of them was a close friend. As a matter of fact, we had a club within the faculty group called the Arts Club, and we met I think once a month and had papers and talked and drank. The person who was running this, who was a professor of aesthetics, was one of the Harvard rejectors.

GARDNER: Who was that?

ACKERMAN: Steven Pepper. I had actually taken a course in aesthetics with him one summer when I was off from college and didn't know what to do with myself. He was, in his very humane way, very critical of my seduction. But it was clear that, for an art historian, to be able to work in a part of the country where all the major exhibitions were--at that time I was doing more history of painting than of architecture--and in the Fogg Museum, where you could actually teach with originals-- I couldn't



afford to be sentimental about California. Students of mine in Berkeley never saw originals of major quality. And Dean [William] Wurster in the architecture school regretted it a lot, because I had started the new program of professional history in the architectural school, which is something to which he was committed, although, by that time, I had brought in another person who could carry on the program. Well, it still represented a change, and in California, which had something of a provincial self-consciousness, losing people to the East aroused the suspicion that "Maybe it isn't so good here." [laughter]

GARDNER: That fear.

I'll move you up to the Princeton year now, and I think we've caught up. You were there to work on Art and Archaeology (1963). Talk a little bit about how you developed that book. It's a long time for you to sit back and recall--it's thirty years--but it seems to me that that's pivotal in the sense that it's a gathering together of your thoughts on the history of art history and also the formulation of your ideas on ways of looking at art history. So I'd be interested to know how you brought all that together, how you synthesized that.

ACKERMAN: Well, I had one or two of my articles about what was wrong with art history published before that time, so I'd been thinking about the direction of the



field and--

GARDNER: Talk about your stance and how it evolved, how you felt.

ACKERMAN: Well, I'd also been restless with the lack of theoretical consideration in the training of art history. And as I've said before, I'm sure I felt that the Germans with whom I'd studied had been burned by a theory that promoted Nazism and decided that theory was evil. And they also decided that America was a country of innocence and hope. They had extraordinary fantasies about this country they'd come to. They didn't want to contaminate us with the European thing.

It's interesting, along those lines, that one of my professors, [Karl] Lehmann, wrote a book about Jefferson [Thomas Jefferson, American Humanist] as his contribution to America. And recall Jefferson's feeling of Europe as corruption and America as purity, the land of husbandmen, and the need for everybody to be on a farm. Lehmann, coming to this country, wanted to see it in Jeffersonian terms, and maybe the others as well. The Lehmann book, incidentally, is one of the best on Jefferson.

A certain proportion of German scholars didn't think that theory had anything to do with it, and then the other proportion wanted to forget theory as having to do with Europe. In any case, it was very hard to go very far in



the field as an intelligent practitioner without realizing that innocence of theoretical practice wasn't going to work.

So I haltingly tried to dig my way out of that pit. I always liked working theoretically and cursed myself for not having studied philosophy as an undergraduate, because I never felt at home with philosophy, though obviously it's a stepping-stone to innovative theory. I think my theoretical writing, as in the Princeton book, is weakened by the lack of a philosophical foundation. I mentioned in that connection George Kubler's book called The Shape of Time. I don't think Kubler did much with philosophy either.

The people who were strongly trained in philosophy usually got too far away from practical impact on art history. For example, there is a British writer by the name of Michael Podro who has written on the history of art history, which becomes a kind of discipline itself. It's hard to read those writings and get any idea what you ought to do as an art historian, where this Princeton book of mine would be helpful to somebody trying to define a course of action. It's a bit like an architectural treatise, "How To Build a Building." But I know that portions of that book were regularly assigned in graduate seminars on method from the time it was written until the



recent theoretical rage. Now I'm sure that it doesn't make the bibliographies of up-to-date teachers anymore. I don't know if I said before, but when I went back to it for the republication of the chapter on style in my collected studies [Distance Points: Essays in Theory and Renaissance Art and Architecture (1991)], I was delighted with how well it was written. I thought, "My God, I didn't know I wrote so well." [laughter]

GARDNER: Isn't that nice. One of the things you mentioned in the introduction to the book, and then of course you've mentioned it throughout, is the influence of Meyer Schapiro at that point. Could you describe what that was and how Meyer Schapiro influenced you?

ACKERMAN: Well, in American art history there were some good people of a generation older, but they never had a really international standing. And I think that the first people who were operating on an international plateau were Meyer Schapiro and Millard Meiss. They started publishing only in the early thirties. Prior to that time, judging from the early years of Art Bulletin, it's just not of the level of the best European work. Schapiro had evolved an extraordinary method of his own. Nobody else had combined the intellectual currents of his age so well with the preservation of the acuteness of observation of the connoisseur. And in his first works on Moissac and Souillac and

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IN THE SUPREME COURT OF JUDICATURE
IN NEW ENGLAND
AND
OF THE BARRISTER AT LAW
IN THE SUPREME COURT OF JUDICATURE
IN GREAT BRITAIN
AND IRELAND
IN TWO VOLUMES
THE SECOND VOLUME
LONDON
PRINTED BY J. BARNARD, AT THE SIGN OF THE SHIELD, IN ST. PAULS CHURCH-YARD
1764

other sculpture of the Romanesque period, he was penetrating in the precision of his observation. But then he could add to his work his knowledge of Freud and psychiatry and the Marxist foundation he had gained as a communist. Later on, he got into semiotics, so he was always on top of contemporary intellectual adventure. Plus he was constantly engaged in contemporary art and taught it and visited in artists' studios and was close to the artists. So all of these things made him unique. He was very fiercely critical of major art historians, whose limitations he was ready to speak about in reviews that always became major works in themselves--on [Bernard] Berenson, on, I think, [Kurt] Weitzmann, who is a Princeton scholar of medieval manuscripts. He had an enormous influence in his writings and his lectures. He had few students. Apparently it was hard to work with him.

GARDNER: Where did he teach?

ACKERMAN: Columbia [University]. And impossible to finish if you were working there.

GARDNER: Impossible to satisfy.

ACKERMAN: I don't know if it was so much that he wouldn't like things that were given him, but he would tell students to do something else in addition, and he'd always have new ideas that you should have been pursuing all along. It was very hard.



GARDNER: Which of his ideas found their way into your work at that point, would you say?

ACKERMAN: I think it was primarily the inspiration of seeing him in person doing his work in an extremely original way. The acuteness of vision and the consciously articulated method, I would say, was, in his early work, the most evident thing. I read a lot of other things of his later. At that time I probably knew just the Romanesque sculpture studies.

GARDNER: But you do credit him in that. The other two people you mentioned are Ernst Gombrich and Jesse Reichek?

ACKERMAN: Well, Jesse's my closest friend in California, a painter. He would read things of mine and comment on them. He was a graduate of the Chicago Bauhaus and was brought to our college of architecture at Berkeley to teach basic design and ended up by teaching courses in revolution. [laughter] But Gombrich is the most celebrated art historian of our time, primarily for his profound knowledge of Renaissance humanism and for the work he did in the application of the science of perception. His interest in the philosophy of Karl Popper informed his writings and confirmed his rather conservative disposition. He had an enormous influence on me, primarily through the book called Art and Illusion, in which he addressed the perceptual foundation of



representational art. His one drawback, from my point of view, was his dislike of the art of the twentieth century. His passion for explaining illusion, I think, blocked the capacity to see abstract art at all.

GARDNER: It's interesting, because the notion of perception is very important in the work, and that's something that does come out very strongly. So now we've traced its origin in your work.

ACKERMAN: Well, I think Art and Illusion may have come out after my Princeton book. He was also important for me in the work that he did on the impact of humanism on Italian Renaissance art. I did a lot of teaching, though not much writing, on Italian Renaissance civilization and history of ideas, starting at Berkeley and then continuing at Harvard. That is one of the things I really enjoyed, teaching Petrarch and Galileo along with painting and architecture.

GARDNER: There are a couple of thoughts that stood out for me, some of the things that you did in the book. I just have two of them down, and I'm sure they're superficial, because there's so much in it for such a short piece. But one of the things you talk about is what you call the "avant-garde fallacy." Let me ask you to talk about that a little more, because it does seem to me to be important.



ACKERMAN: Well, I think what I meant by that was the idea of art always moving in an evolutionary way to a next triumph and the avant-gardist as being the person who gets there first and therefore is good. The work then becomes a marker in a sequence, and all emphasis is placed on the sequence. It was the intellectual fallout from the theory of evolution and from the historicism of the nineteenth century and Hegel. It went galloping ahead, dominating art history and criticism up through the fifties and the New York school of abstract expressionism, and then it began to hit obstacles in the sixties and pop art and conceptual art. One would still talk about the avant-garde, but it didn't play the same role, and it wasn't linked to history in the same way.

The other day, at a talk at Columbia, I heard Rosalind Krauss saying that, having devoted her career and her efforts as the editor of October magazine to the support of the avant-garde, she was nonplussed with what to do now that the avant-garde had become the academy. [laughter] And I think that pretty much expresses it.

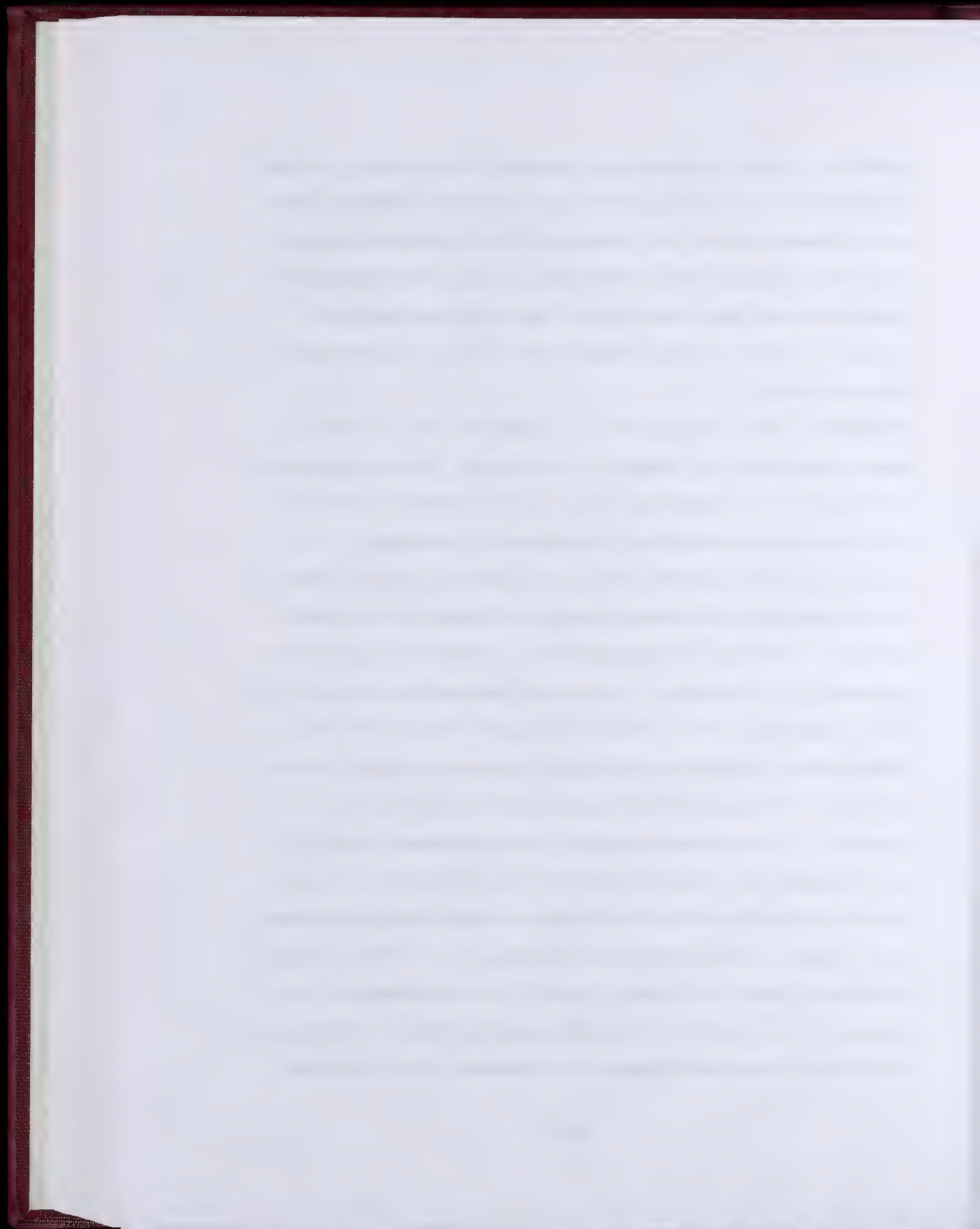
GARDNER: Well, but should there be another avant-garde after one avant-garde becomes the academy?

ACKERMAN: I don't think we need it. I think artists can make perfectly good art if their only aim is to speak to now, and the future can do its own thing.



GARDNER: It is interesting, because you're right. After World War II and during that period of the fifties, there was a compulsion of the avant-garde all around the world. The other concept that struck me as very interesting in that work was your contrast of the historian and the critic. Could you talk about that? Or am I pushing too hard on the--?

ACKERMAN: Well, the critic, it seems to me, is occupied with placing in the sense of evaluation, the historian in the sense of a historical role. And historians tend to avoid evaluation entirely--excessively, perhaps. The critic is also somebody whose intellectual sources have to be in contemporary concerns such as those that motivate artists. You can do history with a different approach to contemporary thoughts. Now things are much more confusing than they were then. Then it was just the critic who wrote about current or historical materials from a point of view of evaluation and approached issues such as quality. A historian supposedly straightened things out in the past and tried to explain the historical context. But now criticism is so involved in theory and has backed off, really, from evaluation entirely that-- Well, I mean, following Rosalind Krauss, they're both academic at the moment. It's hard to know what another type of criticism would be, given the profound involvement with what has



mostly been inherited from literary criticism. And the people in the art field have been struggling to find out how you translate what's called the text by the post-structuralists into the work of art. There is a tremendous need to deal with the work of art without all the overlay that it had in traditional aesthetics. But I know that's not an issue that would be of interest today. You wouldn't talk that way.

GARDNER: Well, but that's interesting, isn't it? That it was important to talk about thirty years ago. It was important to say that in 1961.

I have one other thing, and then I guess we'd better stop--the last question I'll ask you for today. You mentioned that you found Princeton a particularly uninspiring place to be. At the same time, you did credit about half a dozen of the people who were at Princeton at the time. Was there anybody with whom you worked comfortably and happily there? Or were you fairly isolated in your work?

ACKERMAN: I was isolated in the sense that the art historians weren't thinking about the problems I was interested in. And somehow-- I don't know. Maybe [Erwin] Panofsky wasn't there that year. I can't imagine that Panofsky was there and I didn't make more use of his being there. I did see something of [Paul] Frankl, but he was



very old. Frankl had been the teacher of [Richard] Krautheimer, who was my teacher, so that I was his academic grandchild. Frankl wrote two great tomes on style and on method in art history, which were so complex that nobody ever managed to find their way through them. One never got published until about two years ago, and that's a great pity, because it was written at the time when all the other things had happened--my book and Kubler's book and so on. This was just the time for people to tackle that problem, and Frankl tackled it very intelligently. Then the manuscript stayed in the drawer in the hands of a literary executor, who wasn't very active, and emerged in 1989, at which point it was of no interest to anybody.

GARDNER: Right. How about that.

ACKERMAN: At least it came out. I read it and commented on it in my postscript to the style article ["A Theory of Style." Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 20 (1962): 227-37], which I revised for [Art and Archaeology] and republished in Distance Points, with a postscript commenting on it from the perspective of thirty years.



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MAY 22, 1991

GARDNER: Well, I thought we'd start off by finishing with Princeton [University] and your year's experience there. You've talked about it and how you felt about it, so I won't go into that too much. But I was interested, as I always seem to be, in some of the people you worked with, particularly the ones you made notes on in your dedication at the beginning [of Art and Archaeology (1963)] and gave thanks to. You can tell me whether those thanks were for anything political. Well, first of all, Rhys Carpenter. Now, you and Rhys Carpenter would have been working more or less simultaneously and parallel.

ACKERMAN: Well, actually he and I didn't see much of each other because he wasn't in residence. He had his own home in the countryside, and he didn't have much reason to come into Princeton from where he was. So that we had a couple of meetings in which we clarified what the division of labor would be, which wasn't very difficult, because he was dealing with very different problems. Then I didn't see much of him. So I haven't much to report. He was already retired at the time. I think he was a very strong figure. He had theories about ancient art which were stimulating in the field but were often considered far



out. I think he did both fundamental work, which had lasting value, and this kind of gadfly work which woke up his contemporaries, particularly in a more popular kind of writing that was intended for textbooks. I believe he had a great respect and influence at Bryn Mawr [College], where archaeology and classical antiquity has always been very strong.

GARDNER: What is the relationship between the art historians and the archaeologists? In a way, particularly in that generation, but also before, you were going after a lot of the same materials for different reasons.

ACKERMAN: Well, there was quite a distinction in many cases. First of all, there was the discipline of classical archaeology, and at Harvard [University], in graduate school, you can still study either ancient history of art or classical archaeology. And when George Hanfmann was at Harvard, he taught both of these, often bringing the students together. The classical archaeologists had to be adept at ancient languages, and they spent a considerable amount of time excavating in the field. Most major universities, I think even Bryn Mawr, had an excavation going on somewhere or other, and this gave them a kind of experience that was special, although I would say the majority of people who were ancient art historians also had excavation experience. So the



distinction isn't very great. On the one hand, the classical archaeologists have to be better prepared in literature and topography, and on the other hand, those who avowed themselves to be classical archaeologists and taught in departments of classics were, on the whole, more positivist--if possible--in their approach. They weren't involved in the interpretation of works, and they weren't, for the most part, even involved in cultural interpretation. I'm speaking of the majority.

The great archaeologists were also great humanists. But it's more or less a distinction between a tendency toward the more scientific and a tendency to the more humanistic that would divide the two. I am afraid that classical archaeology is a discipline intended to bring out an American tendency to handle everything as a mechanical problem. Most of the great people who called themselves archaeologists were not Americans, or those who were outstanding were not insistent on being identified as classicists. At the American Academy in Rome there are fellowships in classical studies which very frequently go to archaeologists. In my many years there, I didn't encounter very many people whose imagination was very broad, although the first professor who was there in my time, [Frank] Brown, was a remarkable person of great imagination. There's a professorship of classical



archaeology-- No, it's classical studies. The present one is a literary person, and some very good people have held that.

GARDNER: It's interesting to me, in the light of some of the things we've talked about earlier-- Art historians were involved, for example, with the excavation of Cluny, with Sardis, and so on. I guess I contrast that to the notion that nowadays, when they begin to dig out a city block to put up a skyscraper, they send out a team of archaeologists but not art historians. Is there some kind of dynamic there? When an art historian goes to work with Cluny, does an archaeologist run behind tapping him on the shoulder, telling him what he should--?

ACKERMAN: Well, in America, we don't have any training in medieval archaeology other than what is given by professors of medieval art. Very little money is spent on it, either in America or Europe. The state support for archaeology in Europe has always had a very strong bias for antiquity. It's something that has been much lamented, especially for people who do urban history, because there's an incredible richness of knowledge to be gained by the excavation of cities, particularly between the fifth and the tenth century. The Dark Ages are darker than they need to be. This could be completely altered by an equitable distribution of funds between classical and

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medieval excavation. Very few people are qualified in medieval excavation.

The best example that I can give is Martin Biddle's work at Winchester which revealed a Saxon town, with really fascinating results. Martin used to take American students over there. In fact, part of the economy of his excavation was getting the cheap labor of many students who would work with him. But I don't think that it was steady enough to train people up. He's British and was at the University Museum at the University of Pennsylvania for a while and then had a run-in with them and left. So he wasn't actually teaching very much here. But that's kind of off the subject.

GARDNER: Well, yes and no. Off the subject of Princeton, but not the interesting pairing of art and archaeology, which is what sparked us in conversation in the first place. Okay, I'll go on and talk about some of these other people whom you mentioned, and you can tell me who they are and why you thanked them. The first one, [Cesar L. "Joe"] Barber?

ACKERMAN: He was a professor of English in the Midwest and a very cultivated, well-read person, and it was just valuable to talk with him.

GARDNER: Let me fix context. Were these the people who were working on other parts of the--?

ACKERMAN: These were doing other volumes of the series



[Princeton Studies, Humanistic Scholarship in America],
yes.

GARDNER: I see, I see.

ACKERMAN: And John Higham was the other that I most remember. He was an imaginative American historian; I think his volume is on American history. Curiously, I just used, to great benefit, for the talk I gave last weekend, an essay of John Higham's about what he described as a radical change in American society at the time of the Civil War--not having to do with the war or slavery or anything, but just having to do with the end of a period of disorder and movement and insecurity and into another era of consolidation. It's a very good piece written not long after this time he was in Princeton.

GARDNER: The next one I have is Donald Egbert.

ACKERMAN: Donald Egbert was on the faculty at Princeton and a very versatile person in architectural history who had great influence as a teacher and not so much influence through his written work. He didn't write a lot. It just wasn't the way that he did his best. But I think he urged a lot of people into the study of architectural history. He did a work on the social movements in art history or something similar [Social Radicalism and the Arts, Western Europe: A Cultural History from the French Revolution to 1968], which to me was extremely useful. Well, what I got



out of it was an understanding of the origins of the concept of an avant-garde in European art and then in America. Well, he just had a lot to offer in conversation.

GARDNER: Wen Fong.

ACKERMAN: I don't know what I owe to Wen Fong, except he was friendly and amusing. He's a professor of Chinese art and a curator at the Metropolitan [Museum of Art], although not at the time. At the time he was a boy genius. I think he was maybe five years younger, still in his thirties, but becoming a real figure in the study of Asian art and always creating controversy. We may have talked ideas over.

GARDNER: Richard Schlatter.

ACKERMAN: He was the general editor and--

GARDNER: So you had to thank him.

ACKERMAN: Well, he was a very wise person. I guess, as an editor, he probably was helpful to put things together.

GARDNER: And Walter Sutton.

ACKERMAN: Another member of the group. I can't remember what volume he did, but-- It's difficult to distinguish. I can't say much about him. I think we met for dinner once a week, and we all tossed ideas around.

GARDNER: So there was a group of people writing simultaneously. I guess this is the Whitney Oates concept of the humanist interchange.

ACKERMAN: Yes. Well, I guess there were about five



people.

GARDNER: During the year, having yourself taught or studied--well, actually taught at all of them--at Yale [University], NYU [New York University], [University of California] Berkeley, and Harvard, did you--?

ACKERMAN: Never at NYU.

GARDNER: No. Well, you just studied there. Were you curious about the way Princeton was teaching art history and architectural history? Did you wander into seminars or classes every now and then just to see--?

ACKERMAN: No, I had no contact there at all, except, pro forma, a couple of faculty members invited us to dinner. That's about it. And it didn't seem to me that much was going on that was interesting. I would say I got nothing out of the faculty there. I don't say that there was nobody who had anything to offer. Well, Donald Egbert was a member. But Princeton has been plagued with a kind of a conservatism and a parochialism which is very damaging to it. It originally came from their belief that only a Princeton person would be a good colleague in the department. If a person were Princeton, he was likely to be promoted. So it created a kind of a gentlemen's club which wasn't healthy. And after that had gone on for a while, they tried desperately to pull themselves up and failed, because others didn't want to go to a place that



they felt was that way. I mean, if they'd asked me, and if I hadn't been going to Harvard, I wouldn't have gone. When I got to be chairman only a couple of years after arriving at Harvard, they tried to attract two of our colleagues. And they were good choices. If those people had gone there, it would have greatly strengthened the department at Princeton. But they didn't go there, and that kept happening. Then they were one of the last universities to waken to the fact that it was time that they hired women, and when they tried that, the best women didn't want to go because it was a men's club. So a period of bad decisions, and then the department, no matter where it is, can perpetuate badness way beyond the desire to change things.

GARDNER: But it's also hampered, in a way, by its Princetonness. You know, just the notion of Princeton and how it deals with itself and has dealt with itself, it seems to me.

ACKERMAN: Yeah. Well, things began to change very much in the administration of [William] Bowen and [Neil] Rudenstine. They tried to just invade the weaker departments and prop them up. And they had quite a hard time with art history for the reason that I just said, whereas Princeton's history department is superlative and the math department and others. So it doesn't have



anything to do with the geography, I guess, although I find that community unbearable.

GARDNER: You've mentioned that before. The next thing I want to talk about is the Ackerman work on style, particularly the one in the Journal of Aesthetics ["A Theory of Style." Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 20 (1962): 227-37].

ACKERMAN: I think that's the same as the one in the book [Distance Points: Essays in Theory and Renaissance Art and Architecture (1991)] with minor--

GARDNER: It's a little bit different. It's a little bit different, but it is similar. So that arose from the same source that year at Princeton?

ACKERMAN: It may have been the first draft or something like that.

GARDNER: You mentioned in our previous discussions that there were three works out that were virtually simultaneous. There was yours and George Kubler's [The Shape of Time]. Whose was the third?

ACKERMAN: Well, I talked about the simultaneousness of Tom [Thomas S.] Kuhn's Structure of Scientific Revolutions, because the concept of change in culture is the same kind of thinking, which I'd never realized at the time, and which only really dawned on me when I was doing the postscript to the republication of "[A Theory of] Style" in my collected essays. It was just a moment when that



sort of thinking about evolution in culture was current.

There are two other essays on style which are widely read and have been influential. Meyer Schapiro's "Style," which is the most widely read, which has a somewhat linguistic underpinning and preceded ours. It was in the fifties. I later wrote an essay on Meyer's article for a volume published on his seventieth birthday ["On Rereading 'Style.'" Social Research 45 (1978): 153-63]. And Ernst Gombrich published an article on style in the Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences. So it was an issue that occupied everybody in art history at that time. One of the most interesting things about it is that it doesn't occupy anybody at all anymore and that it's really an idea that has seen its time.

GARDNER: Why do you think that that was the time that it burst forth in the meadow?

ACKERMAN: Well, we're talking about the end of the fifties, and if you think of what was going on in art and architecture at the time, it figures. Abstract expressionism was all about style. It was not about anything else, really. Well, I'm not saying there wasn't substance in it, because, to me, style includes content. So it's not style just in the sense of stylishness. It's style in the sense of a mode of expression. In fact, this is really the apogee of modernism, and the primacy of style goes with that. Then,



in the sixties, with the emergence of pop art and the like, other things became primary. For example, Andy Warhol's Brillo boxes and the like were a statement that style is of no import. And statements of that kind continued to be made right up until now and probably will continue.

There's a kind of autocriticism of art. And this interacted with cultural criticism of the role of art in society and the role of the patron of art and so on, so that in the world at large, style was becoming less and less significant. And then the antistyle thrust was given further support by literary theory, which, in the eighties, began to seep into art history, the impact of poststructuralism and deconstruction. So, in many different ways, the style foundation was undermined, in my case most importantly in the late sixties, coping with the student revolution.

GARDNER: Well, we'll get into that in greater detail when we get you to Harvard.

Let's talk about the different approaches that you had. First, tell me about Meyer Schapiro and what you might have called the linguistic approach, or being affected by linguistics, or however you phrased it.

ACKERMAN: Yes. Well, his style essay, which is of the fifties, in a sense speaks of a style as a language. There's been a considerable amount of discussion about the origin of style in the word "stylus," which is a Latin



word, and it refers to the instrument you write with. It also is a word that is used by Vitruvius in writing about architecture, where he calls different kinds of temple fronts-- One would be aerostyle, and another would be pycnostyle, and so on. This had to do with the disposition of the columns along the facade and the spacing between them. Style in that sense means "type." And many of the authors who talked about style discussed this issue of the linguistic and conceptual origin and whether the emphasis was on the typology or the emphasis was on the hand and its individuality.

The Schapiro approach is, I would say, one that goes farther than the others in paralleling the style in the work of art with a style of writing that gives individuality to something. Schapiro's piece was published in a volume called Anthropology Today, which was edited by [Alfred L.] Kroeber, who was an associate of mine in the University of California, a great anthropologist of his generation. I participated in a conference on anthropology in Austria at Kroeber's invitation sometime in the late fifties that [Claude] Lévi-Strauss also attended. There was just discussion; I don't think we had any formal papers. In the case of Schapiro, he was asked not simply to deal with art as such, but with the man-made object.

That was also true of Kubler. Kubler's contribution, really, comes from the attempt to treat everything made by



man as the field in which he would examine style, because Kubler worked both on European art and on pre-Columbian and southwest American, in which the entire literature was produced by archaeologists and anthropologists. So he had quite a wide experience in those fields and did very interesting theoretical work about the borderlines between them.

Now, I don't recall as well Gombrich's piece, but I imagine that it was particularly focused on his lifelong interest in making and matching, on the element of imitation, the imitation of the world and the imitation of the work of art which imitates the world. And that, of course, under the heading of style, could occupy quite a lot of his attention.

GARDNER: It's interesting that you're all influenced by anthropology at this point, that Kroeber and Lévi-Strauss and so forth and so on are lurking in the background and that the Meyer Schapiro article was in Anthropology Today. Were you keeping up at that point with anthropology and with--?

ACKERMAN: Not really. I'd read Kroeber's major general book, a textbook [Anthropology]. I'm sure I would have benefited by more familiarity with the anthropologists.

GARDNER: Where you and George Kubler seem to begin to diverge in your two approaches to style is on the



separation of the use of something and its artistic analysis. Can you talk a little about that? Explain it better than I just did and talk about how that contrast works and how it may have manifested itself?

ACKERMAN: It has to do with the area in which one is working. If that is on a non-Western society, the integration of the work of art with life is more intimate. One couldn't speak about pre-Columbian art without having in front of one's mind the fact that objects were not made to be works of art in the sense that Westerners make works of art, but were made to play a part in ritual, religion, and everyday life.

Now, nothing forces one to focus attention in that way if one works on Italian Renaissance or modern art. The attitudes that were formed in the Italian Renaissance were responsible for separating the work of art from everyday life. In current art history, there is a criticism of the overwhelming influence that the study of Italian art in the classical tradition has had on the way artists think about tradition. As a matter of fact, the practice of art of the last twenty years has been, to a very marked extent, a criticism of the Renaissance.

GARDNER: Can you talk about that more?

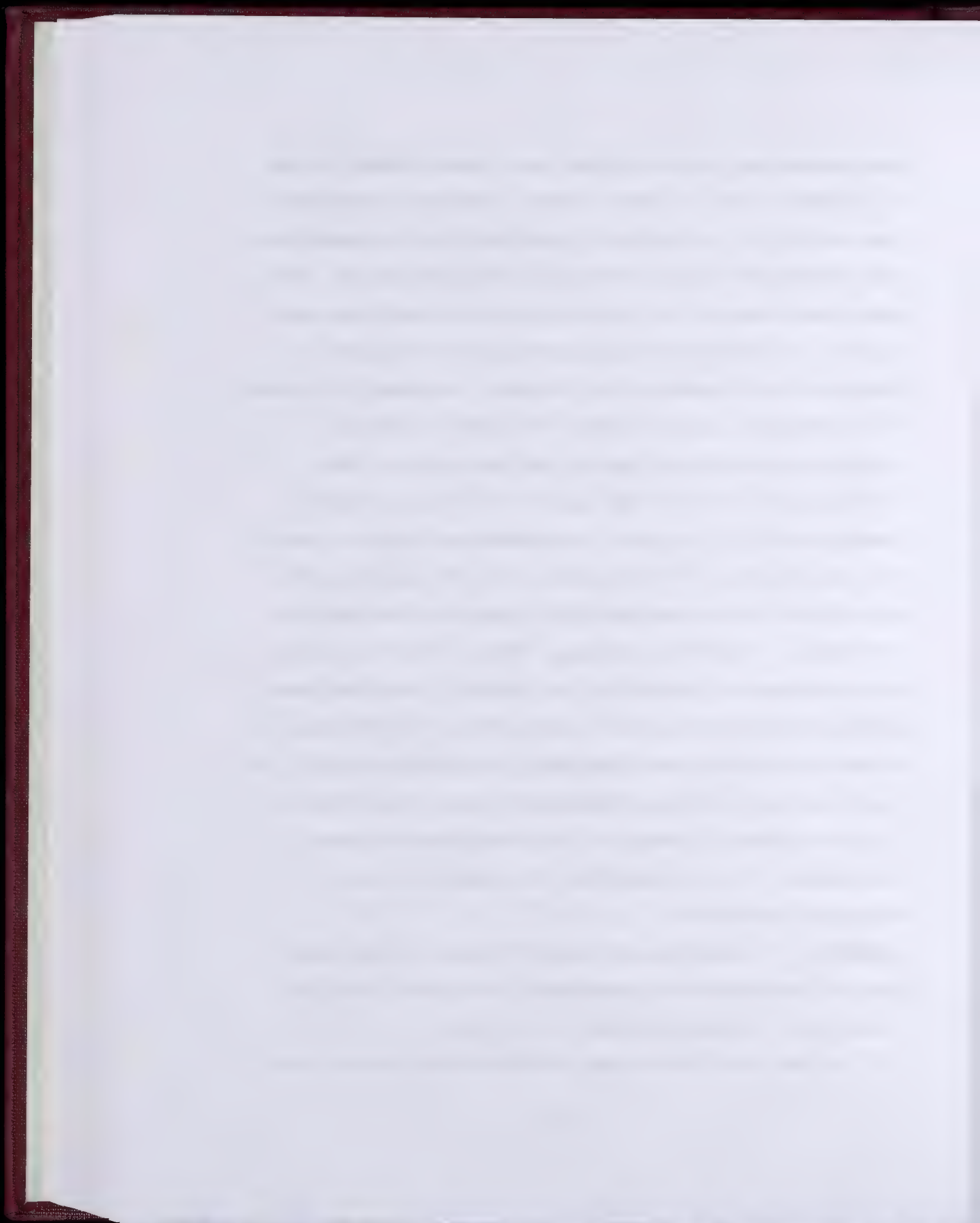
ACKERMAN: Well, principles of art which were considered verities in the Renaissance and in the criticism of



Renaissance art, whatever they were, were blasted by one or another artist of recent times. The expectation that the work of art be an object which could be possessed has been undermined by conceptual and installation art. The idea that a work of art should be original and show the mark of the artist has been undermined by a variety of conceptual and appropriation artists. Whatever it is that would have been used in praise of a work of art by Michelangelo or Titian has met the criticism of the contemporary artist to the point that if you accepted these criticisms, you would be speechless before a work of the Renaissance. I'm not saying that I'm rejecting the criticism; I'm only saying that things are fundamentally different. I had done an essay, which I didn't publish, on the subject of the end of art history, which has been addressed by several people, most notably Hans Belting in a book with that title [The End of the History of Art], as to how we deal with our traditional field of art history in a world where so many of its principles have been challenged. This is something that has to be very seriously worked out.

GARDNER: I'm debating with myself whether to get into some of the current in more depth now or save that for later, and I think I'll save it for later.

At the time of the late fifties, early sixties, at



the time your works came out, your book and article and so on, did they occasion discussion and debate, given the fact that you now had these different approaches to style? Were people at CAA [College Art Association of America] and other forums discussing the ways of looking at style and what it meant?

ACKERMAN: I wasn't conscious of it. What I thought was characteristic of the early sixties was an extraordinary ferment, intellectual ferment, that was cross-disciplinary in type. We may have talked of this before. I spoke about the meeting organized by Kroeber, which was an early instance of it. Then I participated in a couple of the symposia of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in the early sixties in which people from many disciplines would come together. There seemed to be almost a hope that a kind of universal learning was in the formation that would encompass the sciences and the humanities. There was a vitality which, in retrospect, seemed exceptional. Whatever the results may have been, it was very heady to participate in these interchanges. It differed markedly from the kind of things that brought people together around poststructuralism in the eighties, because there, in a way, the effort was being made to catch up with French and German thought and to make it into a canon. Whereas in the early sixties, the



activity was being generated on this side of the Atlantic, to a large degree, probably because of the influence of Europeans who had come here sometime before. There wasn't really any effort to construct such a canon but just rather to explore the possibilities.

I think of one instance: At a symposium put together by the Academy of Arts and Sciences by Gerald Holton, the science historian and physicist who was editor of the academy journal Daedalus at the time-- The symposium was on science and culture. Almost everybody there was in a different field of learning. I spoke about a concept which I had discussed in my first article in '48, about the medieval concept of scientia, which was thought of as knowledge and theory in the Middle Ages, where these two things were put together in opposition to the idea of ars, which meant technique and manual ability. Scientia drew together all learning and making no barriers--



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GARDNER: I'll let you complete your thought.

ACKERMAN: I was going to say that physics was the dominant discipline in science, and I suppose that lent force to this kind of more cumulative approach, because physics at that time dealt with large issues of the nature of energy and the source of everything. And the physicists were themselves humanists. I was influenced at the time by a book by [Percy W.] Bridgman, a Harvard physicist. I read several books graspable by a person like myself with no scientific capacities that just gave a general format of scientific thought. It was about the time I began to work on medieval and early Renaissance science and did some studies of art and science, the science being of a kind that even I could understand.

GARDNER: In talking about style, and particularly in the way that it's framed by you as opposed to by Kubler, it strikes me that there's a difference between looking at art and looking at architecture, because the element of utility begins to come in. Architecture is, after all, to a certain degree, functional. Can you talk about that a little bit, the difference here? Because you're an art historian and an architectural historian. I'm interested

THE HISTORY OF THE CITY OF BOSTON

FROM THE FIRST SETTLEMENT
TO THE PRESENT TIME
BY
JOHN HUTCHINGS
OF THE BOSTON BAR
IN TWO VOLUMES
VOL. I.
BOSTON: PUBLISHED BY
J. B. ALLEN, 1825.

The history of the city of Boston, from the first settlement to the present time, is a subject of great interest and importance. It is a city which has been the seat of many of the most important events in the history of the United States. It is a city which has been the birthplace of many of the most important principles of the American government. It is a city which has been the center of many of the most important movements of the American people. It is a city which has been the home of many of the most important figures in the history of the United States. It is a city which has been the scene of many of the most important events in the history of the United States. It is a city which has been the seat of many of the most important principles of the American government. It is a city which has been the birthplace of many of the most important principles of the American government. It is a city which has been the center of many of the most important movements of the American people. It is a city which has been the home of many of the most important figures in the history of the United States. It is a city which has been the scene of many of the most important events in the history of the United States.

in that.

ACKERMAN: We weren't pressing that very much in those days. Everybody was trying to push architecture into the categories that had been created for the figural arts. A decisive manifestation of that was the idea of mannerism. Mannerism was a concept which had been developed to define the work in European art which followed the classical period of the early sixteenth century and which had been given support by the literature of the time, which in Italy addressed the idea of maniera. Maniera was a word for style, but the period of mannerism was represented as a time when a focus on style became foremost. And because it existed in the figural arts and had documentary support in the writing of those times, it was applied also to architecture.

One assumed, at the time, that this was just a natural thing, and in teaching the history of Renaissance architecture, we would present mannerism as the style that followed the classical in the early sixteenth century. But already at the time when I was doing my study of Michelangelo [The Architecture of Michelangelo (1961)], which I was working on in '58, '59, '60, I wrote that I didn't think mannerism was a useful term, that it had been adopted from another art and that it didn't apply to buildings. The reason being that what had been defined as mannerist was the



way in which surface decoration was employed on facades and interiors, but if there's to be an architectural style, it has to express itself primarily in the plan and the disposition of spaces.

It's something that I felt a few years ago when people were trying to promote postmodernism as a style. Only in extreme cases could one define a postmodernist plan. There wasn't a different program, there wasn't a different construction technique. The buildings were traditional types with different faces on them. The exploitation of the idea of mannerism was a manifestation of the excesses of the application of style concepts across the arts.

But, as I said, even in painting the issue of mannerism is dead, because it was founded on style. But I found it hard in my writing of the last twenty years to find a way to use my approach to architecture, which is fundamentally social, economic, and political interpretation, in a way that harmonized with the interpretation of form. I feel that I haven't found a perfect way of integrating them.

GARDNER: Well, it gives you something to keep working at.

ACKERMAN: Yes, but it doesn't bother me all that much. I've gone off that. What I want to do in the future isn't related to either scheme. I have one project which



involves a different technique which does open up more possibilities to deal with form, and that's a study of the Renaissance origins of modern architectural drawing and its relation to figural drawing. Here form would be important.

GARDNER: In the article on style, there were a number of sentences that stood out, but one that I found very interesting. You said, "The history of art has been fashioned into another version of the materialist success story." Could you tell a little bit about that?

ACKERMAN: Well, art history has had a kind of teleological evolution in the forefront for a very long time, where one of the desirable things in art would be to progress further along. That's the avant-garde ideal which commenced in the early nineteenth century: that the artist's responsibility was to push his field further and to create something new and different which other people would follow. And the mark of whether or not the artists succeeded would be whether or not they were followed by others of the same kind. Well, that's the Tom Kuhn proposition for science. Art history has had a strong inclination to ignore anything that didn't create a following, the success of which could be measured in terms of how many ripples it caused. So I do feel that this is allied with the economy and what constitutes

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success in the political and economic spheres. The art market reinforces this. The art market permeates the work that can be said to have gone forward to make the next step. One of the biggest terms in the era of style consciousness was "influence." Graduate dissertations would undertake to show the influence of this on that. Frequently it happens to a really boring degree.

One thing that I don't think I treated sufficiently there is this: that in those years, along with style, the other leading preoccupation of art historians was iconography, the study of the history of symbols and their application in the work of art. What deserves some introspection by art historians is how the same mindsets affected the study of iconography and of style. You would think that the two would be autonomous. But the same process of tracing influences, the same idea that some kind of a dynamic was going on and that the symbol would be altered in a way that the style was altered, was affecting both.

The study of iconography has declined precipitously in recent years except in Dutch seventeenth- and eighteenth-century art, where only in recent times have they begun to be preoccupied with what all the objects in the pictures really mean. They used to talk about Dutch interiors as if the objects were just objects, and then



they became conscious of the fact that each one was meant to say something. Maybe they leaned over backwards in this respect.

But, in any case, you don't see much iconographical analysis in present studies of Western art. It's still important in early medieval, where they're undertaking to work out the interaction of church doctrine and the icon. An icon is on a different plane from the image which is made to be seen for formal reasons.

[Erwin] Panofsky, in a famous book called Studies in Iconology, tried to define the pursuit of iconology as a large intellectual concept that incorporated iconography. He called in this study for the integration of iconographical considerations with cultural history in an exalted form. But people didn't have the capacity to follow him, and, for the most part, his followers remained mere iconographers and catalogers of motifs.

GARDNER: There's an interesting parallel here, and I worry about this question. I guess I may be getting into water that's too deep for safe swimming. It seems to me, though, that, from your description of iconography particularly, the notion of the symbols and signs and tracing their use and origin is oddly parallel to French structuralism and Lévi-Strauss, which, in literature, had-- How can I phrase this? Which took literature in the



direction that you just described art history going before. And yet it did with a concern for and interest in signs and symbols. That's not a question. I should phrase that better. But do you see what I'm getting at? It seems to me that while iconography has disappeared in art history, it's done so for the same reason that a parallel movement exists in literature.

ACKERMAN: Well, I suppose that where it was really useful to literature would be closer to what Panofsky called iconology. Certainly in the hands of poststructuralists that would be true. There's a difference between language and figuration, which, I think, explains why it took a long time for structuralism and poststructuralism to hit art history and why it's still floundering a bit as how to produce something of value. Because when you begin to treat a work of art as a text, you immediately limit your observations to certain features. For example, it would be difficult to deal with the color in a painting and the expressive capacities of coloration if you're calling a painting a text. Well, I suppose a subtle literary critic would disagree and say that it was possible to deal with the equivalent of color.

GARDNER: It depends on which literary critic.

ACKERMAN: Well, I feel that that was a piece of unfinished business for me, that I dealt with style and I



didn't discuss iconography. I mean, of course it comes into that book, but it isn't dealt with systematically the way form and style are.

GARDNER: Were you in touch with Panofsky during this time?

ACKERMAN: No. I may have seen him once or twice, but--

GARDNER: Did you keep up correspondences with [Richard] Krautheimer or [Karl] Lehmann or any of the--? So you were sort of off on your own now. You were finding your own intellectual sources and moving away from the earlier teachers.

ACKERMAN: Well, I think all through my career I've been very deficient in opening up to the people from whom I might have learned. It just wasn't a skill of mine. I always felt I didn't want to bother people. And then, as you know, conversation can remain on a superficial plane. It's hard to engage in the kind of dialogue that is then printed later in books.

GARDNER: Did you do it the other way, though, with your students?

ACKERMAN: I think, to a considerable degree, the reason that, upon my retirement, I had accolades from students and that they arranged to get me the teaching prize of the College Art Association was simply that I've always been a good listener and I've always put myself out to



help other people. And I think also, not simply in career terms, but also intellectually, I held out high standards for them in the way of creativity and tried to keep them from publishing things just because they had new material.
[tape recorder off]

GARDNER: So it's 1961?

ACKERMAN: Well, I guess the year at Princeton was '60-'61, and the first year at Harvard was '61-'62.

GARDNER: Well, why don't you describe what it was like debarking at Cambridge [Massachusetts].

ACKERMAN: At the time I arrived at Harvard, the department was known everywhere as "the Fogg," which was symptomatic. It was called after the [Fogg Art] Museum, and it was physically housed in the museum. But also the interaction of the department and the museum was close, and the faculty members were curators of different departments. And also the closeness was expressed in the placement of the offices: the director and the chairman had contiguous offices with a door between so that they could talk back and forth. The Harvard tradition had always been one of connoisseurship and the preparation of students for the museum field, and that's how it was received in the world at large, although on my arrival, it was about evenly balanced between people who were more cultural historians and people who were more object



people.

On the whole, I felt that I was coming into a place where works of art were the primary focus. And in my early years there, I was delighted to teach with real works of art, having come from Berkeley, where I could never find anything for the students to write term papers on. The best fifteenth-century Italian painting at the time I was teaching that field in San Francisco was an anonymous predella. It came closest to having a quality of major art of anything they had. In teaching the survey course [at Harvard] we would mount an exhibition nearly every week of original works of art from the museum or local collectors for the students to discuss, with maybe up to twenty-five objects in a show. We were given a gallery, and if one were lecturing on, say, neoclassicism in French painting, you had two Davids and about ten Ingres paintings, not to speak of drawings and prints. It was fabulous. Then I would teach tutorials with students in the drawings cabinet and bring drawings out to discuss at close range. I wasn't as qualified to do this as some of the colleagues were, but it gave much pleasure and knowledge to deal directly with works of art. That's a pleasure which is completely denied by contemporary approaches, and it's considered antisocial because all you're supposed to be getting out of it is your own enjoyment. I didn't even do it myself in the



last couple of decades. But anyway, I felt that I had something to learn from this, although I think I was already aware at the time that I belonged to a new generation that was going to head off in a different direction.

The department was very harmonious at the time. The generation earlier than mine had all been wealthy and collectors themselves. And this integrated with the museum tradition. Most of my seniors lived along Brattle Street, which was the elegant address in Cambridge, in very fancy houses and would give dinners with caterers and ladies dressed in doilies around their waists who would serve. It was from another era. I guess I was the youngest member of the group for a couple of years until John Rosenfield came in. It isn't true that every member of the faculty was wealthy. The professor of Chinese art, Max Loehr, was not at all well-off and in addition got a very bad retirement arrangement so that he was poor in his late years. The same for Jakob Rosenberg, who had been a refugee from Germany, as had Max Loehr and George Hanfmann. So there were three German scholars, who, naturally, didn't bring wealth along with them and who all led very simple lives. I thought, in retrospect, for many other people at the time, however it was called, the Fogg was ancien régime.



But there were many talented people. Two contemporaries of mine who had preceded me were both outstanding in their work: Seymour Slive, whose field is Dutch art and who has published a great deal of first-rate stuff and made marvelous exhibitions in Dutch seventeenth-century art, and Sydney [J.] Freedberg, whose field was Italian Renaissance and who was an exceedingly acute observer of things, though he was cast in the Berensonian mode.

We worked together extraordinarily well, until the disruptions of new theory began to cause strains. The harmony had to do with the fact that art history, at that time, still was not really very self-conscious theoretically, so that if everybody had had a theory and a philosophy of how they were doing art history, then there would have been a cause for disagreement. Complete harmony could only, I think, exist in a situation in which people felt that there weren't problems of method and philosophy in the field, and you could only think that if you were unconscious of what the problems were. But anyway, it produced a golden age as far as a community that saw communally. And the students shared this. So I can be nostalgic about the atmosphere while being critical about the lack of what I think is necessary tension in humanistic work attending on differences of approach. [laughter]



The harmony was all upset later on by the appointment of Tim [Timothy J.] Clark, a Marxist. The more conservative members of the faculty--not many of them, but a couple of them--were upset by this, and they caused a lot of ruffles. On the whole, I think Tim got support and approbation from the faculty, but he did leave, and I think his departure wasn't entirely disconnected with the initial conflicts. But Harvard was kept from the Princeton problem by its method of appointment, which is unique. The core of the appointment committee for tenure is composed of experts from other universities. They sit with the president and the dean and a couple of Harvard faculty members from outside the department, and members of the department enter singly to testify before this committee, so that they do not have a part in the deliberations other than by preparing the materials. Then the department is asked to send out blind letters. That is to say, you're thinking of appointing Joe Smith, and you have to write to twenty qualified people in the field asking them to rank a group of eight people. There are six placebos and Joe Smith there, the other being a possible contender. So you get, as a rule, frank assessments, which often undermine your expectations. But in any case, the system is far from being foolproof. We've made some mistakes even that way.



But anyway, at the time, it provided for bringing Seymour Slive first and me second after Freedberg had been appointed--Freedberg being a Harvardian all the way through and Seymour and I never having been to Cambridge before we arrived. So it was a system that provided new blood. And there was already new blood from the refugees, the three that I mentioned. Maybe Max came after I did; I can't remember exactly. But anyway, there was that degree of vitality built into the system, which I think saved Harvard, because with this object orientation and a museum preparation and the Brattle Street estates, there could have been a grave danger of creating a stuffy environment. And likewise, at a time when anti-Semitism could have prevented the appointment of more than one Jew to a department, three arrived in a row, Freedberg, Slive, and myself in addition to Hanfmann and Rosenberg and Kuhn. The bias against women took a much longer time to defeat.

GARDNER: Do you know who your committee was?

ACKERMAN: No.

GARDNER: So the department or the university sets that outside advisory committee up, and they do what they do, and then you come.

Well, let's talk about some of the people who were in the department when you got there. You mentioned several,



and I'd like to hear more about them. One person I'd like to have you talk about a little more is John Coolidge, because he was--

ACKERMAN: Yes, he was director.

GARDNER: He's one of Richard [Cándida Smith]'s other subjects.

ACKERMAN: He was director of the museum at the time. John Coolidge had a brilliant start in my field, Italian Renaissance architecture--did work on Vignola and other things--and he also was interested in sculpture. He was an extremely stimulating teacher. We all felt that it was a disaster that he had taken the directorship, because it kept him from realizing his potential as a scholar, which was extraordinary. But it was inevitable that he should do it--he was only thirty years old, I think, when he was appointed--because he was old Boston family from way, way back and descended from Paul Revere and Jefferson. Furthermore, he grew up in Harvard. He was one of ten children, I think, and his father [Julian Lowell Coolidge], a professor of mathematics, was the master of one of the new houses. When the housing system was established, the father was appointed. They all grew up right in the midst of campus in Lowell House. He went to Harvard, and he did graduate school there. He also went for some graduate work at NYU. So he just had that sense



of noblesse oblige, or whatever, that would have made it impossible for him to turn the museum down even if he didn't want it.

He was, I would say, only moderately good as a director, but we're talking about a time when it was a very small operation which I called a mom-and-pop store. It was run on a very modest budget, and it didn't do any big-time fund-raising. John made some good acquisitions. He was there for twenty-plus years, and he retired before he left the faculty. He directed a number of dissertations while he was there. But he certainly was a forceful spirit within the community and functioned as a member of the faculty.

GARDNER: Okay. We're just about at the end of the side, but I have another tape. Tell me more about Sydney Freedberg. Why would Harvard want two Italian Renaissance scholars?

ACKERMAN: Well, it was a period when the Italian Renaissance was considered to be half of art history. It was undoubtedly related to the buildup of American museums and the art market. I didn't have any particular skill at teaching painting, although I did the fifteenth-century Italian art course a few times at the beginning. Also, we had the bulk of the graduate students, so that, just in terms of people power, it was necessary in order to cover



those who were doing dissertations and qualifying exams. Having two people was a desirable thing, although it probably would have made sense to have a senior and a junior. But then, the architecture side of it was important, too. But anyway, I think it was primarily because of the dominance of Italian art. Our department was, I would say, smaller all through this period, and even now, than the other major graduate schools.

GARDNER: Really?

ACKERMAN: There were fewer things covered. The Harvard system always tended to be top-heavy. We had a bulk of tenured professors and then a very small number of assistant professors.



TAPE NUMBER: VII, SIDE ONE

MAY 22, 1991

GARDNER: Let me know if I'm wearing you out. Tell me more about Sydney [J.] Freedberg. What was he like?

ACKERMAN: Well, Sydney Freedberg came from Boston. He came from a poor family. I think his father was a tailor. He went to Boston Latin High School, a public school that had a strong classical program at the time, and got into Harvard [University]. And somewhere along the way he decided to make himself into an English gentleman and developed a somewhat British accent, which never left him, and began to dress in a very British, refined style with elegant waistcoats and the like. He was a very colorful person who had an enormous impact. He conveyed to students a way of being as well as a way of seeing things. His method was essentially intense observation of works from a style point of view, which was good discipline for those who were going into either academic or museum work. He was magnetic and had a string of adoring followers. It's interesting that of those who worked with him, the best moved away from that approach, and I think that was a matter of the times. We together were very collegial and bantering. I would kid him about his affectations, as did my wife Mildred [Rosenbaum Ackerman]. We had met before I went to Harvard, having been in Rome at the same time.



GARDNER: Oh, really?

ACKERMAN: Well, anyway, he, I think, was a very forceful presence all along. He left just about the time prior to his retirement to go to the National Gallery [of Art] to become chief curator. Our relationship deteriorated in the last years because of his opposition to Tim [Timothy J.] Clark and the efforts that he'd made to circumvent that. He had always, prior to that time, given ground very graciously in faculty arguments over new appointments. If he was outvoted, he accepted it. But this time, he just couldn't take it. I felt that it was unfortunate on the grounds of principle and also turned out to be wrong, because Tim was an extraordinarily effective teacher. I think, basically, a lot of people like Sydney felt threatened by the onslaught of all the new theoretical things, but particularly by the Marxist. And also by the fact that, for so many people involved in new theoretical concerns, academic precision seemed to be going out the window, and people would make representations of situations that were bent by their agendas. That was a real shock.

Well, I guess there was some fundamental unease that was generated in '69-'70 with the politicization of the campus, and people never got back to the collegiality that existed before. Because at Harvard, at that time, the



faculty literally split into two political parties. There was a faculty council that ran most of the faculty business and policy, and it was by election. The two parties ran candidates on tickets which were called liberal and conservative--although I think the conservatives didn't call themselves conservatives--and people stopped speaking to one another across those barriers in many cases. Though we didn't have that much of a break within our department, still relationships certainly cooled between us.

GARDNER: We'll talk more about that a little later. Seymour Slive is the other you talked about as being one of the three of you all coming at the same time.

ACKERMAN: Yes. Well, Seymour was pretty much of a self-made man. He also came from a very poor background, and he went to the University of Chicago, I think right through at the University of Chicago. He studied there with Ulrich [A.] Middeldorf, who was an expert on Italian bronzes of the fifteenth century. So Seymour's mentor was not bringing him into a specific field, which he more or less picked up on his own. Middeldorf was a very methodical scholar on the borderline between documentation and connoisseurship, who had some block and never really realized himself. He wrote a number of small articles about different objects in bronze. But he must have been



a very strong figure to work with and was the only person, really, that Seymour had to guide him. Chicago was not a great department. Seymour made his reputation in dealing with the major figures--Rembrandt, Hals, Ruisdael, and so on, of the Dutch seventeenth century. He's a very vigorous, strong-spoken person, utterly absorbed in his work and putting in eighteen-hour days, on the surface extremely collegial and genial, but always withholding something of himself. But it was pleasant to work with him. We didn't have a great deal of social interaction. As a matter of fact, I didn't end up by drawing any of my closer friends from my department. These were people that I associated with during the day, but we didn't spend other times together. Seymour was also a very strong presence and has a whole string of people that he's taught that are now doing Dutch art everywhere.

GARDNER: I have some other names that were given to me by Richard [Cándida Smith]. He wasn't sure if they'd gotten there before you, simultaneously, or afterwards. I just have two or three, and then if you could fill out names, if you would. Fred [Frederick] Deknatel?

ACKERMAN: He was in the department when I was there. He taught nineteenth-century painting, and of course there was still a great interest in that. A lot of people worked with him. He wasn't a notable scholar. He was a



Harvard man who'd-- I think in the period in which the whole group of senior people came in, it was prior to this draconian system of refinement, and it was quite easy for the bright Harvard graduates and Harvard undergraduates to move on to their career as they did at Princeton [University]. So there were the three people who were effective in their field but never really made themselves a widespread reputation: Deknatel and [Charles] Kuhn and [Benjamin] Rowland. They belonged to a generation of liberal educators who devoted themselves much more to teaching and to college life than later ones. [tape recorder off]

GARDNER: The question I asked before was whether you, as you were brought in, were expected to publish.

ACKERMAN: No, I don't think so. I think the system brought people in who were obsessed with publishing and with appearing at meetings all over the world. There was never an atmosphere from the university that one had to put out. It's just that they brought all these maniacs together who may have pushed each other ahead just through the heated atmosphere. But, aside from the fact that at the end of the year you were supposed to hand in a list of your achievements, there was nothing urging. At an earlier time, I think they fretted over it, before they had the appointment system established by President [James



B.] Conant. If Harvard brought in a person who already had, at the age of forty, twenty-five publications, they wouldn't have worried that in the next years that person would go silent. And with the extraordinary research tools, it was very unlikely that it would happen. So I guess Harvard probably was the least publish-or-perish place you could get, simply because it was a matter of no concern. In an earlier era, one of the people who was there when I came, named Leonard Opdycke, had never published and never got to be a full professor.

GARDNER: Some of the people you just mentioned as you passed through talking about Deknatel-- Is it Benjamin Rowland?

ACKERMAN: He was a generalist. He taught Asian art, he taught American art, he taught nineteenth century, whatever. He was a gentleman-scholar type. He did publish some general books. He was a reclusive sort, and he didn't have very many students. He was a person who was very much devoted to the old atmosphere, and when there started to be rumbles in the late sixties, he got absolutely turned off and disgusted.

GARDNER: And left? Or did he?

ACKERMAN: He may have retired early.

GARDNER: And Kuhn was the other one you mentioned.

ACKERMAN: Kuhn was director of the Busch-Reisinger Museum



of Northern European Art and did wonders in that role. At the time he got the position, they hadn't any post-Renaissance stuff in there at all, and he brought in a Bauhaus archive and a vast amount of expressionist and other things. He was terrific. On the faculty, he taught northern European art, so he duplicated Seymour to some extent. He was a wonderfully mild and collegial person. He was chairman at the time I arrived. He did that really expertly. Not a person who made a mark on the field by his research, but certainly by what he did in that museum.

GARDNER: Right. Are there other faculty that we should be talking about?

ACKERMAN: Well, Jakob Rosenberg was a very strong figure. He essentially taught connoisseurship, how to look at works of art. He was the curator of prints and drawings, a very fatherly kind of person who had a great impact on people who went on to be curators. He did quite a lot of writing on Rembrandt and other Dutch artists and he produced catalogs.

George Hanfmann was a very strong presence. He was the one person who was most theoretically inclined and wrote on issues of method and then started the excavations at Sardis. He was a powerhouse, terribly energetic in getting funding for Sardis, and has made this into a great center where everybody who goes to Asia Minor visits. He



concurrently ran the program in classical archaeology and art history and was curator of the collections in ancient art. He had left Germany as a teenager, so that he actually did his graduate work at Harvard.

GARDNER: And this odd mix all got on collegially.

ACKERMAN: Well, I think it's for the reason that I explained, that there was no doctrine. But I have a tendency to see peace around me wherever I am, and other people might describe it differently.

GARDNER: Well, that's to be left to them. What were the first things you taught when you got there?

ACKERMAN: I taught early Italian painting and the survey, which I did all the time I was there. Not every year; I'd change off with Sydney or Seymour. Then Renaissance architecture. And then I'd do tutorials, which differ all the time, as the seminars would.

I think the most successful seminar I ever gave--its success was as much due to the students as to the teacher--was on Renaissance art and science. In this seminar, there were maybe nine or ten people, and out of it there came about four dissertations, and the dissertations then became books. They went through a great metamorphosis, so that the books were no longer about art and science, but people were introduced to artists that caught their interest and that they continued working with. The



results weren't according to the plan of the seminar, which is an interesting phenomenon, that they could just stir up something else. But what happened was that because the people themselves were very good and made original contributions, it just took off. I always felt that in graduate teaching maybe my strongest point was the ability to see what somebody could do, more than it was in teaching them how to do things. And I always felt that I was at my best after they had performed and given me something to look at, and I could then say something about the effectiveness of what they'd done. I've never had the sense that there was one way, to the extent that I taught a method. I conveyed my approach more by example than anything else.

GARDNER: What was the relationship between teachers and students? How large were your classes? And how did that compare to other places you'd been?

ACKERMAN: At that time, we had a very large graduate school. The overall Harvard Graduate School of Arts and Sciences had 1,500 students, and in our department we would take up to 35 a year. That's now down to under 500 overall and about 10 a year.

GARDNER: That's startling.

ACKERMAN: Well, the economy doesn't support more. But a seminar would have up to 12--I never would take more than

THE HISTORY OF THE
CITY OF BOSTON
FROM THE FIRST SETTLEMENT
TO THE PRESENT TIME
IN TWO VOLUMES
BY NATHANIEL BENTLEY
OF THE BARRISTER AT LAW
IN GREAT BRITAIN
LONDON: PRINTED BY J. BARNES, ST. MARTIN'S LANE, 1794.
AND BY J. BARNES, ST. MARTIN'S LANE, 1794.

12, because it just didn't work out in a seminar--and down to 4, I would say. And then lecture courses: when I did Renaissance architecture, it was part of the requirements for the architecture school, so that would bring in 90 architecture students, and then maybe from 10 to 20 other arts and sciences students. The survey courses would occasionally have 250 to 300.

GARDNER: How would those classes work when you were teaching 250 to 300? Would you lecture? Would you have TA's [teaching assistants]?

ACKERMAN: I lectured three times a week, and then students met in front of the works of art with a teaching assistant once. The other lectures would have maybe 40 students, in a course like early Italian art. Then there was a humanities curriculum; general education it was called. I taught a course in Renaissance civilization for a number of years in tandem with Myron Gilmore, a historian.

GARDNER: How were your attitudes and philosophies being shaped in those years? Did you start to take on new directions?

ACKERMAN: The movement towards interdisciplinary learning that I mentioned, in the early sixties, was influential on my way of thinking about teaching. And my attitudes changed with the political challenges of the late sixties,



which represented a fundamental crisis for me. I stopped working at art history and devoted myself to trying to find an approach that would correspond to the way I felt about the political and social situation.



TAPE NUMBER: VIII, SIDE ONE

MAY 29, 1991

GARDNER: Okay, to begin with, as I said, we left off talking-- Your last phrase had something to do with the effect of the sixties on you. So I thought I'd ask you to talk a little bit about that, starting off with what your political inclinations were going into the sixties.

ACKERMAN: Well, politically, I was always--you called it liberal--I guess left. After the war [World War II] I joined the American Veterans Committee [AVC]--this was a left-wing veterans committee, a non-American Legion type with social agenda. In the chapter in New York that I joined, I went as a delegate to a national conference of the AVC in, I guess, 1947, and this New York group was taken over by communists. At the convention, I felt that I was out of my depth, because the communist members were so good at outmaneuvering and cornering everybody else. So I concluded from that that I wasn't a very adept politician. The head of it at the time was one of [Franklin D.] Roosevelt's sons; I can't remember which one. It was a very promising organization, and I think it played a role in the early sixties. By the time the disturbance over Vietnam began, I think the AVC function had already diminished considerably. I don't even know if it exists any longer; if it does, it certainly doesn't make much of



an impact. But it was formed for a political agenda.

Since the Vietnam War began, I was opposed to it, and Mildred [Rosenbaum Ackerman], my wife, too. She was very active in social things and began to build up a circle in Cambridge around a women's organization--I think it was called the Voice of Women.

Well, then my children, by the sixties, were beginning college, so that when the student reaction came at the end of the sixties I felt very much in tension, something like being a noncommunist in a communist group at the convention. I was torn between the idea of the traditional humanists that were preserving civilization and the destructive aspects of some of the manifestations relating to the war. I had to get acclimated to expressions of extreme opinion that were destructive of property and sometimes damaging individuals. So I felt puzzled by all of this, which made something of a problem for me. It was something I felt I had to work through, because I could feel, at the onset of what's been called the postmodern condition, the very different attitude towards the significance of history and towards the so-called eternal verities. So, intellectually, it was an extremely difficult moment.

At Harvard [University], my son Tony [Anthony Ackerman] was apprehended in the occupation of a building.



Actually, they made a mistake, and he was accused by the faculty committee of being in a place different from the one he was in. That is to say, he was part of an occupation of the music building at one point--he was studying music--which turned out to be a moderate sit-in, and then he was accused of having been in a situation where people were hurt, which was not the case. But anyway, at home there was a lot of discussion and unease between me and my children and then within myself, because I was trying to find the kind of middle way that wasn't active enough for them.

The faculty at Harvard then got very polarized, and it went on at a time when there had been established a faculty council, which was an advisory group like a cabinet for the dean [of the faculty of arts and sciences] of about eighteen people, who were elected to serve and to represent their constituency and who made the basic decisions. Because of these disturbances, one very significant kind of decision being made was how the faculty and the university was to react to the student activism. In 1970, shortly after the onset of this, I had a leave--I guess it was '69-'70--and while I was on leave, I got a telegram asking me if I'd run for the faculty council on the liberal slate. Gradually, the elections to council became very political, and there was a conservative

and a liberal party. People really fell out with one another and stopped speaking to one another over this issue. The conservatives being the people who, with respect to the disruption, wanted simply to put a lid on it and simply to send away everybody who caused any difficulty. I don't know that there was very widespread support of the Vietnam War, but the conservative position was essentially related to the sacrosanct nature of institutions of learning and of the canon of learning. So I agreed that I would run, and I was elected. Then, as a representative of my party, which was in the minority of about 40 percent of the faculty council, I was also involved in the party politics: going to meetings, identifying candidates, and making policy, and so on.

One interesting thing about this is that the two groups divided up somewhat according to discipline. The most radical department was philosophy, and then the arts and architecture were more or less radical, and on the conservative side were government and history. In the sciences, it tended to divide evenly. It would make a good essay to investigate the frame of mind of historians and people in government in relation to the attitude towards institutions which change and how academic approaches would lead to social and political points of view.

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It also occurred to me that, within the field of art history, the whole thrust of twentieth-century art had been involved in disrupting formulas that had been set for ages. And it would be very difficult, as a teacher of a basic course in which I was trying to sensitize students to be open to new art, to adopt an institutional and conservative approach. That was a big problem for me. From a perspective of the present, looking back at that time, early twentieth-century art, up through the New York school of the fifties, does seem to belong to the age of earlier twentieth-century modernism, while the art of the sixties was the real disruption of tradition as well as of technique and aim. I saw that later, but at the time, to me, Jackson Pollock looked like a revolutionary. So what was going on around us in the course of the sixties, with pop art and neodada and the like, tended to nudge a person towards a nonconventional stance.

GARDNER: To toss a brief question in here--because your narrative is flowing so well, I don't want to interrupt it--from the way we've talked about the Department [of Fine Arts] at Harvard, I'm surprised that it turned up radical or turned up liberal.

ACKERMAN: I wouldn't say my department did. When I say the arts, I was thinking more about film and the active arts: sculpture and painting and architecture. My

department was divided. The person who had asked me to run was an assistant professor, Michael Fried, who is now a very well known art historian, a controversial one. He was very much in with the philosophy department, which was the farthest out of any. So some of the junior members would have been on the so-called liberal side, as well as two or three of the senior people. So it was pretty much divided. Two members were really passionately antistudent, one who had been attacked by Nazi gangs as a kid in Berlin.

GARDNER: Who was that?

ACKERMAN: George Hanfmann, who just saw any disruption of law and order to be Nazi, feeling that it was letting the wolf in the door, as it were. He was really frightened. And another, Ben [Benjamin] Rowland, who was so upset that I think he retired early and just went into seclusion. He probably rightly judged this change as being more than just related to the Vietnam War and to involve a change in the attitude towards the meaning of art and tradition. That was disruptive of his whole structure, because assuming that this student revolution marked the opening of the era of postmodernism, or at least antimodernism, it did abolish the concept of quality in art.

At any rate, my feelings of ambivalence between preserving the institution on one hand and my opposition



to the war and feelings of harmony with the student aims on the other was at the root of my struggle. And the other factor in my reaction was that the students themselves-- Unlike the Europeans who were in revolt at this time, Harvard students, above all, were completely idiots when it came to the intellectual aspect of their cause. They were incapable of dealing with a revolutionary stance in a responsible, intellectual way. And I don't mean responsible by behaving well; I mean responsible in the sense that their eyes are open to an antiestablishment position. It required some homework. They should have sat down and read Marx and Engels, to start with, and then gone on and on. What they did was read one book by [Herbert] Marcuse, and that was enough to radicalize them, and then they would mouth formulas. I thought to myself, "My responsibility is to ask myself the questions that they ought to be posing to me," because I saw that there were questions there, and I wanted to know what they were.

I dealt with the issue in class, while the majority of the faculty tried to pretend it wasn't there. I would speak about these issues or refer to them and bring them into a discussion of my subject, because, above all, I thought that this involved the possibility that everybody would think that the study of the history of art had

become irrelevant in such a tense moment. And my students appreciated this. In 1969, I was invited to do the baccalaureate talk at Radcliffe [College]. The talk dealt with my viewpoint and the difficulty of talking to parents and students at the same time, because of the gulf that had opened up between them. But I was very much honored by the fact that I had managed that part of my teaching in such a way that I retained the respect of the students without taking a position of a poseur, as some did. Some faculty members took the opportunity to become leaders of the longhairs, as it were.

But anyway, I did a lot of homework. I read the Frankfurt school of philosophy some and attempted to reorient my ideas of history of art. I organized a conference relating to this--the meaning of the disruption of intellectual life--through the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and I brought progressive professors from all over the country to join in a seminar. We invited a leading student radical to join us, who did his best to disrupt us.

GARDNER: Which one?

ACKERMAN: I can't remember his name. He was the head of the Boston University group. Anyway, we published the volume of Daedalus about this, and I did a paper on what I called "two worlds," comparing the opposing positions and



trying to deal with them. The best idea in the paper and one that hadn't come out in current discussions was that American students, from grade school up, are never asked to think about any two-sided problem or to deal with opposition or conflict. American education was then, and still is, absolutely bland with respect to ethical or moral or political choices, and the last thing anybody would get in a grade school or secondary education was something that had any political content in it other than what was universally accepted. I thought, you know, if somebody is absolutely unprepared to cope with conflict, then there's a tendency to act like a baby when it occurs--to lie on the floor and kick, which is what, in a way, I felt a lot of people were doing, just screaming, because they couldn't talk, never having been presented with resolving strongly held opposing views.

It wasn't always this way. In my early years, every educational institution had a debating society. In a debating society you would be given a position which you might not agree with at all and then have to think through the structure of an argument in its favor. That gave people good training. It's interesting that when, in the seventies, the Harvard curriculum was altered, a required elective--that is, an elective in the sense that you had to elect one course out of a number in a discipline--was



called moral reasoning and dealt with, either through philosophy or government, thinking about moral and ethical choices.

In general, with few exceptions, I took a vacation from the kind of scholarship I'd always done, because I was trying to figure out where I was going. And in those years, I wrote and spoke either about issues of critical choice or about the education in the arts. I was on two or three committees that were involved in the arts in higher education--that is, not the history of the arts, but the practice. One in the Carnegie Corporation [of New York], one for the state of Massachusetts university system, and so on. I then published some articles on the subject. In 1970, I was appointed by President [Derek C.] Bok to chair a committee on the arts at Harvard.

GARDNER: Let me interrupt with a question, if it's all right. At various places, at different colleges and so on, different events spurred the student unrest. At [University of California] Berkeley, it was People's Park; at Columbia [University], it was the playground, and so on, the solidarity with the community. Was there anything like that at Harvard? Did it have to do with recruitment or--?

ACKERMAN: I think the issues were tagged on to the upheaval rather than the other way around. And Harvard, I



think, was relatively late. Berkeley was in turmoil three years earlier.

GARDNER: Well, it was in turmoil, really, from the early sixties.

ACKERMAN: So things came along later. The question about the formation of Afro-American studies was a big issue, and I think the most explosive one at Harvard, because it, first of all, ran into the traditions of the faculty determining its own curriculum and issues of quality. It was more disturbing to the faculty than any other thing that came up. And they never resolved it adequately. Still haven't.

GARDNER: Okay. I'll let you go back and talk about it. The committee that the president of Harvard appointed you to, what were its goals? And who were some of your colleagues? And what came out of it?

ACKERMAN: The goals were to make a policy for the performing and practicing arts. There was a split in the committee between myself and the president, Derek Bok, who had just been appointed. That also all had to do with the aftermath of '69, namely that the then president, Nathan [M.] Pusey, was really not very well equipped to deal with this disruption. When Bok replaced him, Bok had already been through a big storm in the law school and had proven to be a good negotiator and a person who could make people

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happy on both sides of a question. What he wanted to do with the arts was to provide as many Harvard students as possible with the equipment to be an amateur and promoter and patron of the arts. The last thing in the world he thought was appropriate was to produce or to attract artists. I think we talked about it last time. Some of us on the committee didn't think that it was such a bad idea that artists should come out of Harvard. As a matter of fact, my wife's assistant in the next room is an artist who came from Harvard.

Another thing that had spurred this was that a large sum of money had been given to the building of the studio building by the Carpenter family, and Le Corbusier was commissioned to design it. So we were getting--or had gotten by that time--this great building, which is Le Corbusier's only building in America, and there was a question of what to do about it, what kind of program we should have. It had been in formation over several years already and had taken a kind of neo-Bauhaus approach, which, in my view, was working very badly. This neo-Bauhaus thing was really designed to make the making of art equivalent to scholarship. The department was and is called "visual studies" so that it wouldn't scare anybody. It wasn't an art department. Furthermore, the core was to be the psychology of art, to set it off on a "scientific"



groundwork. So they brought Rudolf Arnheim there, and he taught for a number of years. Rudolf Arnheim was virtually the only person who was operating in the psychology of art in a creditable sort of way. When he retired, they were at a loss what to do. That was after the time of this committee.

Leon Kirchner, the composer, was a major figure on our committee. He wanted to create a track at Harvard for musical performers which would give them sufficient independence to get their work done and to keep informed and to perform for credit. He and some others were very disappointed in the outcome of the committee, which really didn't do very much for this. The only thing that came out of these deliberations was a course, which he gave as long as he was there, in performance. It was a kind of a seminar, and it was given in an academic context. It was a very successful course. Well, we talked about it a little last time. There were some musicians who made it through and became famous performers, like Yo-Yo Ma or James Buswell. But they really had to be geniuses. And Harvard's admissions policy, being completely based on verbal accomplishment, didn't let very many people through the sieve that would be accomplished in a professional way as performers. And, of course, if you're talking about dance or something like



that, naturally, that would horrify the faculty, although the recreational dance curriculum and the recreational pottery studio, both of them under Radcliffe [College] auspices, prospered and did some very good things.

But, on the whole, Derek Bok wanted an arts program that was parallel with the athletic program.

GARDNER: As an extracurricular activity.

ACKERMAN: Extracurricular. And, as a result of our committee, a center was established for the arts [Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts] with a director whose responsibility it was to keep things moving. One thing that has remained as a regular feature is the bringing of distinguished artists in various fields for three to five days to do their thing and to talk with small groups of students and to give a public lecture and the like. Of course, that didn't fundamentally change anything, but at least it had some effect. And I think Derek Bok was completely satisfied with these results, for which reason I think I should not be so satisfied with them, because I don't think that we got enough through. But we had the Harvard faculty to cope with, and it was hard enough to push certain things through.

They opened up a possibility of credit for what was called independent work, which was meant to expand the curriculum and give people an opportunity to work on their own for credit. I don't know whether that had much of an



impact, except that, in the performing arts, it gave people an opportunity to give more time for practice and preparation. I valued it on that basis, and often people came to me, because of my relation with the committee, to have me sign off for them on projects which I couldn't control in terms of quality or anything--people who wanted to do photography or something like that before there was a regular photography curriculum. So that was that. We got half a loaf.

GARDNER: Were there parallel kinds of studies in other departments?

ACKERMAN: Well, this wasn't departmental. That is to say--

GARDNER: Well, no. But I meant-- Okay, in other disciplines, I guess. I guess what I'm getting at is, was this a response to the student unrest by Derek Bok to try to--?

ACKERMAN: No, I think it was just something he must have had in his head long before, that the arts were good for people-- It's fundamentally a fairly common bourgeois attitude, and one that Nathan Pusey, with his kind of Presbyterian background, would think frivolous.

GARDNER: That's interesting. I just heard a commercial for that on my way up, an editorial on one of the news radio stations.



Well, how long did the student unrest period last?

ACKERMAN: Oh, I guess the early seventies.

GARDNER: Did you get elected to the council?

ACKERMAN: Yes. I served a couple of terms, I think. The first dean who was on there was a powerhouse of a person who went from being a dean into the cabinet of [Richard M.] Nixon, I guess. It was John [T.] Dunlop. He was secretary of labor. He was a labor negotiator among other things. He was a person who broke up opposition easily. And being a naturally timid person, it gave me a lot of hard times trying to hold my own against John Dunlop. But I'm not embarrassed. I think I managed okay. Then Henry Rosovsky took over. Henry Rosovsky was a person of great ability who had a lot to do with knitting the faculty together. The people on my side didn't love him, but they didn't regard him as being an enemy the way they did Dunlop and some of the other figures. And Rosovsky, besides presiding over the lessening of tensions, created a new curriculum called the core curriculum, which was really, I think, a very good thing. It was a curriculum beautifully designed to deal with Harvard's worst problem, which was that, having built a research faculty, the aspect of liberal education was--



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GARDNER: You were talking about the core curriculum.

Could you describe it a little bit more?

ACKERMAN: The core curriculum took the place of what was called general education. By that time, general education had no direction except to host courses that didn't fit what a department wanted to teach. There were also some really screwball things that didn't have to pass any scrutiny. The core curriculum structure was to create eight different fields, from one of which every student would have to select one course in each of the eight semesters of his/her stay at Harvard. And they would be divided so as to assure that people would have variety. For example, a required non-Western course, a course in moral reasoning that I spoke of, one of mathematical reasoning rather than having a calculus basic course, one each in physical and biological sciences, and then one in which I taught called "context of culture"--which was supposed to be a cross-disciplinary approach to a particular moment in history--and there was a required one in literature and one in the arts.

In each of these eight categories, the faculties were heavily lobbied by the dean's office and the committee to come up with numerous courses so that a student would be

THE HISTORY OF THE

REIGN OF

CHARLES THE FIRST

BY

JOHN BURNET

OF THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

IN TWO VOLUMES

THE FIRST

FROM HIS MAJESTY'S DEPARTURE FROM

PARIS TO HIS RETURN TO ENGLAND

IN THE YEAR 1625

AND

THE SECOND

FROM HIS RETURN TO ENGLAND

TO HIS DEATH IN THE YEAR 1649

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THE SECOND

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TO HIS DEATH IN THE YEAR 1649

able to choose his moral reasoning from two or three different courses each semester. The reason I thought this was so beautifully adapted to Harvard was that the faculty were not fundamentally reluctant to teach such courses, but whenever you left the faculty to itself, it would devise courses that were just superspecialized and that were of no interest except to a student who wanted to become a professional in that area. So the core really called out the talents of the Harvard faculty in a way that made the education much more appealing and functional. And the measure of its success is that far more enrollments were attracted by the core than were required. So the students that didn't have to take, say, a second course in a particular area of the core would, because the course looked more interesting than departmental ones.

Rosovsky found a lot of money for it, provided many teaching assistants, and they had a machinery working that made it possible to create a textbook for it by making photocopies of articles and chapters of books, all of which they did legitimately, so that it took a team of people writing to publishers to get their permission to copy things. Some publishers screwed things up by asking such high prices that we had to find alternatives. The provisions for teaching assistants got jobs for your graduate students that were much more numerous than the



department could come up with. Anyway, it worked beautifully, and Henry Rosovsky got such credit that he was invited to become the president of Yale [University], which he turned down in order to see this succeed.

I would say that Harvard, in the course of the seventies and eighties, did not have the kind of intellectual aftermath of the ferment of the sixties that occurred in many other places. There wasn't a battle between deconstructionists and other postmodernists and traditional scholars, partly because our literature departments were so stuffy. The English department fell a whole generation behind Yale (the tables have turned in the nineties). Yale was departing from all of this deconstructionist passion before Harvard become conscious of its existence. [laughter] So the lack of this disturbance and disruption, I think, has been very damaging to the institution. It wasn't only in the humanities. In the social sciences, the sociology department was captured by statisticians, and Harvard, with its tradition of social thinkers like David Riesman and Daniel Bell and Nathan Glaser, has now abandoned that whole direction in a way that I don't think is going to do the university any good.

GARDNER: You mentioned Afro-American studies as one of the areas that was contentious during the student



unrest. Of course, the specialized studies programs have been one of the primary results in a lot of places around the country of the unrest of the late sixties and early seventies. Did that happen at Harvard as well? What turned out in terms of specialized studies programs for minority studies?

ACKERMAN: Well, this always-beleaguered Afro-American department was a constant trouble. By faculty vote, the members had to belong to other departments in order to give it legitimacy by seeing that anybody who was appointed in Afro-American studies should go through the same screening as a member of the department relevant to his/her field. So that weakened it as a department, and members appointed to that department regularly felt that Harvard was starving it out, and they left. So it was very hard to hang on. They finally got one person who was a good diplomat and a good scholar, who died, so they were really starting all over again from scratch.

It was a real thorn in the flesh in the same way that the problem of tenuring women was and is a thorn in the flesh. The system is one that makes for established procedures, because the Harvard appointments are made by a committee in which the department doesn't sit. The department members are witnesses before this committee, and the core of the committee are three people and a few



from outside who are advising the president and the dean on how a person ranks in the field. If you wanted to change anything, that structure made the effort fruitless, because all you're going to get is established wisdom, and that means that any innovation and any change with respect to open access is in really troubled water. So the roster of tenured women at Harvard remains very poor.

GARDNER: I'd like to go back and cover some of your personal bases, personal within Harvard in the 1960s, and then talk about the transition to the 1970s and the way in which you responded to these things that you talked about. It ties into what you were just talking about, and that's why I thought I'd do it now. You mentioned last time that you became the chairman of the department shortly after your arrival there.

ACKERMAN: About a year, a year and a half after I got there.

GARDNER: Who picked that? How did that take place?

ACKERMAN: Well, chairmen are appointed by the dean, who writes every member of the department for their views. It would be wonderful reading those letters! [laughter]

GARDNER: You'd have to look in the Harvard University archives, I guess.

ACKERMAN: There's terrific material you can get out of there. But that's how it's done. And you get a term



appointment. Well, the chief role of a chairman, in a sense of things that matter, has to do with the recruitment. The rest of it is just pushing papers.

GARDNER: Recruitment of--

ACKERMAN: Faculty, department faculty. And recruitment was less laborious in those days because there wasn't any machinery of assuring equity, as there is now. Within our professional association [College Art Association of America], you're now required to advertise every position for a junior faculty member, maybe for a senior, too. In the case of the senior, you're allowed to make judgments that you don't have to prove to be equitable. But in the case of a junior, you have to see every person whose CV [curriculum vitae] is creditable, or you have to talk to them or-- Well, that's exaggerated. You have to go over every applicant very carefully. In those days, as chairman, I would call up Yale and ask if they had somebody in a certain field and what they thought of that person and so on, and then we'd ask the person to come and talk.

GARDNER: Did you then put together the outside committee? How did that work?

ACKERMAN: Oh. Well, for a junior appointment, you didn't have a committee.

GARDNER: Oh, you could handle those.



ACKERMAN: Yes. It's only for tenure that-- The committee is appointed by the president, and the department is asked for names of people who might be creditable advisers. So you send in ten names, and the president brings three to consult.

GARDNER: As chairman, were you the person who submitted the names?

ACKERMAN: That would be discussed with colleagues.

GARDNER: I see. Did you have any ties to the undergraduates at all?

ACKERMAN: Oh, yeah. It's a Harvard tradition in the humanities that half of your work is with the undergraduates. Your yearly curriculum involves one lecture course, as a rule, and two seminars, or two lectures and one seminar. The lectures are open to undergraduates. Some are directed at undergraduates. And then tutorial, and tutorial is small groups or single people, undergraduates majoring in the field. The major required the student to have a tutorial in 'sophomore, junior, and senior year, and the senior thesis, which is undertaken for anybody who wants honors, is supervised by a faculty member. Now, all departments do this. In big departments like history, the faculty members don't tutor. The nice thing about our department, which I think helps it to maintain a large student enrollment, is that the



senior faculty is as involved as anybody else. So we spent, I would say, more hours on undergraduates than graduates.

GARDNER: As chairman, then, you were accessible to both? If there were an unhappy undergraduate or a happy undergraduate who wanted to come talk to you--

ACKERMAN: Well, their first resource is the head tutor, and I was head tutor on two different terms. That's the person assigned to keep the records of the undergraduates, see that they're getting their major requirements, talk to each one of them each year or each term, and know their names, and so on. Now, if the head tutor does something that the student thinks is unfair, you can go to the chairman, but the person that undergraduates know best is the head tutor. Also, each of them has what is called a senior tutor in the residential house who takes care of their overall program.

GARDNER: Did you come with tenure?

ACKERMAN: Yes. I had tenure at Berkeley from, oh, I guess in my last year there.

GARDNER: And tenure at Berkeley was a matter of faculty vote, I take it? As opposed to an outside committee and so on?

ACKERMAN: Yes.

GARDNER: Did you have to deal with the outside committee

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coming to Harvard? Or was that--?

ACKERMAN: Well, yes. In my first term, we appointed John Rosenfield, who's the professor of Asian art. In that term as chairman, I think there was only one tenured faculty appointment. A mathematical system provided that departments of a certain size would get an appointment at every x number of years according to a chart, not according to when there was a vacancy. That is to say, it could have happened, in those days, that four people died or resigned, and a department would still be able to replace them only at the intervals.

GARDNER: Oh, how interesting.

ACKERMAN: Unless you get a special dispensation, which you often did in such cases. But anyway, our department had a five-year cycle. We were supposed to bring in a senior member every five years.

GARDNER: Just one?

ACKERMAN: Yes. It's a small department.

GARDNER: Yes, that's true. But that is a fairly long leeway between people.

ACKERMAN: Well, also, there were a certain number of chairs that were independent which had to be filled, which were curatorial as well, like the one in Asian art.

GARDNER: You mentioned that one of the effects of the tenure system has been a difficulty for women to gain



tenure at Harvard. Are there any other effects like that that you feel have been a result? And positive effects, as well. I'm just interested in your assessment of that system.

ACKERMAN: The chief effect was to absolutely eradicate the old-school-tie aspect of Harvard. When I first came there, the majority of the fine arts faculty were Harvard graduates and Harvard Ph.D.'s. I spoke about how a lot of them lived on Brattle Street.

GARDNER: Right.

ACKERMAN: They were fine people of the old school, but the system wiped that whole group out and, along with it, two types of person. The person devoted to undergraduate activities and interests and who would serve as a housemaster and also would be concerned with undergraduate teaching. Second, the type of person who devoted his career to exceptional podium performance and was known as someone whose course one had to take. And the last of these retired only a few years ago.

According to the new system, incoming faculty were people who had to have the imprimatur of the professional societies in their field. And they came in as I came in, never having been to Cambridge for more than a day in my life, no Harvard affiliations, already with a network of professional ties outside, so that there was no centripetal force. Then, coming into a community where

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VOL. II.
BOSTON: PRINTED BY S. KNEELAND, AT THE SIGN OF THE ANCHOR, IN THE NASSAU STREETS, NEAR THE CORNER OF THE CITY AND FISH MARKETS.
1780.

THE HISTORY OF THE
CITY OF BOSTON
FROM THE FIRST SETTLEMENT
TO THE PRESENT TIME
BY
JOHN HUTCHINSON
OF THE BARRISTER AT LAW
IN THE SUPREME COURT OF JUDICATURE
IN NEW ENGLAND
IN TWO VOLUMES
VOL. II.
BOSTON: PRINTED BY S. KNEELAND, AT THE SIGN OF THE ANCHOR, IN THE NASSAU STREETS, NEAR THE CORNER OF THE CITY AND FISH MARKETS.
1780.

everybody else was like this, I felt that there wasn't anything to create links between us or any kind of associations that were for the interests of Harvard or the like. The collegiality of the community had been really undermined by the system, which, on the other hand, was necessary. You couldn't have the old-school tie running into the late twentieth century. It wouldn't have been appropriate, and it would have lowered Harvard's reputation. This is simply what had been the result of [James B.] Conant's presidency, because he wanted to jack up the level of the Harvard faculty and did it in this way..

Also, it had another offshoot, which is that the junior members of the faculty never got promoted, which causes very bad morale, and it means that juniors don't get engaged with the institution, either. If it's a place where they realize they're going to be chewed up and spit out in eight years, they are less involved than they would be if they felt that, if they did their best, they'd be promoted, the way you feel at Berkeley.

GARDNER: And, in fact, they weren't. Your junior members generally left rather than--?

ACKERMAN: Almost always. There was a gap of thirty-five years, I think, between George Hanfmann and Neil Levine, who were two members who had been raised out of the



junior faculty. In between, Seymour Slive had come as a junior but was almost assured that he would be promoted. It's a relentless system, and in the course of our last appointment last year, my department's candidate--a junior woman--was passed over by the president in favor of the next choice down the line.

GARDNER: Sounds as though it were a source of displeasure for you.

ACKERMAN: Well, I was really miffed in that case. I thought it was really bad. It was a case in which the person who was chosen had a more impressive record on paper: published more and is better known in the field. When we committed ourselves to our own associate professor, it was because we were convinced that she would arrive at that level. But that's very hard for the world outside that didn't know the person to see, so that the outside advisers would advise the president that the person ultimately chosen was more distinguished. Well, you can always find somebody more distinguished than a thirty-eight-year-old. But that's an unfair comment in this case, because the ages of the two were not very far apart.

I think it's a bad system. Derek Bok was particularly rigid about it. I think the new president, [Neil] Rudenstine, will change it. Actually, I think we lost our



last dean on this account. He got so fed up with being unable to get junior faculty ahead. When he came in, this was a plank in his platform, and he was continually being frustrated.

GARDNER: Who was that?

ACKERMAN: Michael Spence.

GARDNER: It's very interesting. So, in other words, the system worked at first and refueled the departments.

ACKERMAN: It worked up to the point when Harvard had about 50 percent of its old-type faculty and 50 percent of its new type. That was a very good compromise. But the system couldn't stop. Besides that, there weren't any old-type characters around anymore to be appointed.

[laughter]

GARDNER: During the 1960s, your work continued-- I hesitate to use the word "traditional lines," but your book on Palladio [Palladio] dates to the sixties, doesn't it?

ACKERMAN: Yes.

GARDNER: And that really is very much in line with the other kinds of things you had done up to that time. Could you talk a little bit about that?

ACKERMAN: Well, it does have more of a social, political thrust. It interprets the architecture in terms of environment, and the villas in relation to agriculture and to the investment of the Venetians, and so on. So it was



innovative in that way, and it was made part of a series that Penguin Books was undertaking called Architecture and Society. The editors of this series wanted to do something new. And just at that time, Sir Allen Lane, who was head of Penguin, died, and the whole enterprise changed. They had to devote themselves more to the bottom line. That series didn't prosper for that reason, but that book did mark a considerable change of direction from my previous one on Michelangelo [The Architecture of Michelangelo (1961)], which took a more traditional approach.

I also began working a lot in the subject of art and science, and I suppose that came out of my experience with the various seminars in the sixties of an interdisciplinary sort and then partly just because I was drawn into things in a very funny way. The first honorary degree I got was from Kenyon College, and it came about this way: They organized an international symposium relating to this famous book by C. P. Snow called The Two Cultures, and they invited Erwin Panofsky. Another person invited was Edward Teller, the physicist who had been involved in the making of the atom bomb and who was very unpopular with the left, a radical reactionary with respect to the cold war. Panofsky said he wouldn't appear anywhere where Edward Teller was appearing, and he said



he'd send one of his students and asked me to participate. I don't know why they accepted me; I didn't have much of a reputation at the time. But anyway, I collected an honorary degree that way. I gave a talk relating to The Two Cultures. I can't remember what the subject was. And somebody then in Princeton, who was putting together a seminar on seventeenth-century science and the arts, identified me as a person who was involved in art and science. That's how things happened. So he asked me to give a talk in this symposium on seventeenth-century science and the visual arts. So then I was already launched. [tape recorder off] That shows how one's intellectual activities can simply be sparked by happenstance. So I did a series of studies on early Renaissance art and science.

GARDNER: Going back briefly to Palladio, now, that pre-dates the student turmoil.

ACKERMAN: Yes.

GARDNER: It was done in the sort of middle sixties. So you were already beginning to get itchy, then, with the notion of social context, I guess.

ACKERMAN: Yes. That was the advanced wave in architectural history, and, at that same time, it was being carried on by [Manfredo] Tafuri, who I had mentioned before. Tafuri, whom I regard as the major force in



architectural history today, was not initially concerned with social/political interpretation but moved into it in the early sixties. Another associate of mine, Michelangelo Muraro, had done a paper on the villas of northern Italy focusing on social interpretation, which was also influential and which he didn't publish until the late eighties.

At some point or other, I was very stirred up by a blatantly Marxist book, which was nevertheless a very good one, by German scholars, [Michael] Müller and [Reinhard] Bentmann, called Die Villa als Herrschaftsarchitektur, and I began to see one very important thing (maybe that was after the Palladio book, but, at any rate, this idea came much more to the fore after the late sixties disturbances and my readings in the Frankfurt school): the possibility of examining ideology, which simply wasn't allowed by traditional historical method. In traditional historical method, your views of the motivation of any artistic activity had to be based on documents and what people said their motivation was. That is, you had to take this as the facts in your investigation. Now, the possibility that people were moved by ideological considerations had never really entered into traditional scholarship. In the current neo-Marxist sense, it meant that what really motivated somebody could be the assumptions of his class



position, and that being the case, he could be entirely unaware of it, and it would never find its way into a document. Nobody says that they want to create a certain thing in order to keep the lower classes in their place or whatever it is.

The reality of the workings of ideology came to me more through the women's movement than through political activity, because it was so apparent in the construction of gender roles how ideology worked and how people who thought they worshipped women were effectively keeping them down. That was a wonderful illustration of what the concept meant.

Sometime along in the seventies I had a seminar in which I insisted that everybody learn the workings of ideology and had them read the first major text on it, which was [Karl] Mannheim's Ideology and Utopia: [An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge].

But anyway, that turn was of the greatest importance in the history of architecture, because a work of architecture starts out with a program. A program is something that the architect is given by the client or patron and that then becomes the generator of a plan. And the program in earlier art history had never been subject to criticism. One wasn't supposed to second-guess history. When a client gave a program, that was what a



historian had to work with. So to be able to just take the program by itself and to investigate its ideological roots opened up a great new realm in criticism and interpretation. It's a more dangerous license than one had before, but it tends to increase the interest in such studies when it's well done. One thing that the traditionalists never appreciate, it seems to me, is how much bad art history is correctly written. When they complain about the dangers to our tradition that these new antimodernist modes have brought in, they don't think how laden a tradition is with enterprises of absolutely no interest. So anyway, this is related to my whole change of approach in that era. I'd have to look again at the kind of things I was publishing in the seventies and eighties to identify where the effects came.

I did one quite political paper when I was asked to speak at the Aspen Conference sometime during the seventies, which was called "The History of Design and the Design of History." It was a criticism of traditional discussion of architectural history, showing how it was ideologically determined and how our approach to history had been artificially formulated according to certain agenda that people thought was just the truth. It was very important for me all the way through my career in commenting on the way art history works to try to

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1786

demonstrate that this so-called objective historical method is ideologically determined. And, more and more, I saw clearly what impact that was having.

It was especially true in the light of contemporary art. The only way you could explain the break between the fifties and sixties in art was by taking a completely new approach, which was that the radical break in the history of art did not come in the early twentieth century when the cubists started breaking the figure up. It was the same old figure in a sense; it just happened to be broken up in a different way than before. A Picasso portrait looks exactly like a Vasari portrait from the sixteenth century, except it has facets. And if you compare that to an Andy Warhol Brillo box, you know where the revolution came. In this interpretation, the aesthetic of the Renaissance continues right through the fifties and the New York school. The same is true of architecture, as well.

So a lot of my ideas were in upheaval. It showed more in essays like the Aspen paper than it would have in my academic writings.



TAPE NUMBER: IX, SIDE ONE

MAY 29, 1991

GARDNER: Did you finish your thought? Do you have some more you'd like to say about things?

ACKERMAN: Well, I was saying that I was still interested in certain problems because they're nice problems. I'm not working on things for programmatic reasons. I didn't set out to demonstrate that ideology is a thing that we have to attend to. One path that I followed was to look at society as a whole rather than at individual artists.

One line I was most interested in was the impact of the Counter-Reformation on art; I was struck by how closely it resembled political allegiances in our own time. When Protestantism began to seep into Italy, some of the ideas of Protestantism, like personal faith and the spiritual element, caused the line between being an adventurous and loyal Catholic and being a Protestant to be almost impossible to determine. That is to say, some of the most pious and devoted religious people were those who were accused of being heretics. And the rigidity of the church establishment in the face of its own devoted supporters just made reform very difficult within the church, pushed it away.

The impact on the arts I found very interesting. In my core course in sixteenth-century Rome, the policies of



the papacy and the Protestant reaction was focal. At that time I wrote a number of papers about ecclesiastical architecture related to the religious and political conditions.

In my bibliography, the two books that I had done on Michelangelo [The Architecture of Michelangelo (1961)] and Palladio [Palladio (1966)] both focused on an individual artist and his achievement, but now the way I was thinking made that frame seem inadequate. The interesting problems no longer seemed to come through the study of the hero-artist, but rather through the context. At that time, I wasn't involved in writing books, either. I didn't write a book between the mid-sixties and late eighties, partly because working in this interdisciplinary way, one has to move out in many directions, and it's much more difficult to expand into volume that way. The next book after the Palladio and its offshoot, Palladio's Villas [1967], is the general one on the villas [The Villa: Form and Ideology of Country Houses (1989)]. I was asked to do the Mellon lectures at the National Gallery of Art, a series. It's not a completely satisfactory book, as such, because in order to follow a form from the origins to the present and to study the metamorphosis of ideology in respect to this, I got myself into a lot of fields in which I don't have a very profound knowledge, working mostly with secondary material. As a result, every specialist who

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reads it finds that, in his field, the book is inadequate and so sours on the whole thing. I'm not ashamed of it, but it seems to be imperfect.

GARDNER: As you were developing these new perspectives on art history--this interdisciplinary, social, ideological, and so on--were there other people doing the same thing around the country? Were there people who gave similar papers or called you up and said, "Jim, I'm working on this. What do you think?"

ACKERMAN: Well, I'm trying to think of the extent to which my contemporaries were involved in it. Not very much. But certainly younger people. There was explosive activity going on as a result of the sixties all over the place. The department at UCLA under the leadership of a chairman who had been a radical leader [Otto-Karl Werckmeister] became totally Marxist, and-- There were other new perspectives. And since 70 percent of young American historians are women, feminist approaches emerged.

GARDNER: Well, how about some of the younger ones with whom you had interaction or exchange or influence?

ACKERMAN: I have to confess that I am not a person who customarily gets stimulus from conversations with colleagues. I'd been very much influenced by [Manfredo] Tafuri, as I've said several times. One strong influence has been a very close friend who's not a colleague in the



field, Jesse Reichek, who is a painter, who was in my architecture department at [University of California] Berkeley. Well, perhaps the influence came more through reading and less through interchange.

GARDNER: Well, what about people you passed it on to, people who were influenced by you?. Or is that too tough a question?

ACKERMAN: Well, I'm sure a lot of my students were influenced in some way, mostly influenced in the sense of openness to nontraditional approaches, because the way I teach is to make as many possibilities open as I can. On the other hand, in the years since the late sixties, I've come down on people who've thought they'd done enough after they got everything right, and tried to get them to make something of it. I'm always asking them for interpretation and, on the other hand, not telling them how I thought the interpretation ought to be, but just saying that what makes any work interesting is what it means in the long run. So I'm sure that there's been a very considerable impact in that way in the work of students. It's often difficult to determine what they took from me and what they picked up from current movements. A recent book by one of my former students [Alice Friedman] on the early Elizabethan house interpreted in the social and feminist sense [House and Household in Elizabeth England: Wollaton Hall and the



Willoughby Family] certainly is fundamentally influenced by feminist studies. My contribution may just have been to make this seem like a legitimate option. I think that, among students of mine, very few remained in the mode of traditional art history. They moved out many different ways. But, at any rate, I think that I gave them a path of self-criticism that helped.

GARDNER: The other very logical outgrowth of your interdisciplinary interests was that you started getting interested in film, apparently, in the seventies.

ACKERMAN: Yes. I had a graduate student who was a great entrepreneur and who eventually became that rather than a scholar.

GARDNER: Who was that?

ACKERMAN: His name is Robert Kuretsky. I don't think he's likely to be a famous name, but I think he's in some aspect of television. He was a great promoter of film and pushed me into giving him a chance to be a producer by getting the faculty involved and starting to make films. One of the earliest was made when we had a very exceptional show of Islamic art at the Fogg [Art] Museum. We filmed the objects and then, around the objects, built a film for which the crew went to Isfahan and shot throughout the city. So this enterprise was taken up enthusiastically by the then director of the Fogg, Daniel Robbins,



and by fellow members of the department, who collaborated on several films, and I remained the kind of chief holder of the bag. But I was enthusiastic about it. And also, at the same time, I coauthored an organization called the University Film Study Center, the chief purpose of which was to collect an archive of film to be used in education and history of film. Later we started a summer school in film production. It had quite a role. It's since defunct. The kind of leading role that Harvard [University] had--there were eight universities at the peak--was made much less necessary when Harvard acquired a wonderful archive from Paris, so it had its own resource. But the study of film was just creeping into the universities at this time, and these two things were parallel from my own activities.

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TAPE NUMBER: X, SIDE ONE

JUNE 12, 1991

GARDNER: Okay, as I said just before we started, I would like to start by talking about the Tim [Timothy J.] Clark story, Tim Clark at Harvard [University]. If you could begin by talking about how he got there in the first place and what the circumstances were there.

ACKERMAN: Well, we were given the senior appointment at intervals that were established by an internal system, so I think that there was a gap of a certain time between the time when his predecessor, Jean Boggs, left and we appointed Tim. Jean Boggs was the first woman brought into the faculty with tenure, apart from Emily Vermeule, whose professorship was an endowment of Radcliffe [College] and, therefore, was not by department initiative. Departments had to compete for the privilege of getting the Radcliffe professorship, and our bid won. But that is different from making an appointment from within the department. I don't know whether at that time the department was prepared to appoint a woman to tenure. It must have been, oh, early seventies; I'm not sure. Well, actually, she was a joint appointment of fine arts and classics. And obviously she was a person that should have been considered under any circumstances. Then Jean Boggs--who had been the director of the National Museum of

THE HISTORY OF THE

REIGN OF

CHARLES THE FIRST

IN WHICH ARE CONTAINED
THE
MOST IMPORTANT AND INTERESTING
CIRCUMSTANCES OF HIS REIGN
FROM THE BEGINNING OF HIS
MAYESTY'S REIGN
UNTIL HIS DEATH
IN THE YEAR 1649

BY
JOHN BURNET
BISHOP OF SALISBURY

LONDON
Printed by J. Streater, at the Sign of the Gun, in St. Dunstons Church-yard, near St. Dunstons Church, in the County of Middlesex.
1724

Canada and has now returned to that post [after directing the Philadelphia Museum of Art]--taught for maybe four years at Harvard in nineteenth-century [art]. She was a specialist on Degas.

I don't think she was happy at Harvard. I felt that, on the one hand, she didn't feel that she was assimilating well and that she felt a prejudice against women. On the other hand, she suffered a lot from the fact that her years as a museum director had put her out of touch with teaching, and she had all the strains of a beginning professor. Well, and also being single, I think, made her social life less than desirable. I don't think that the whole episode reflected glory on Harvard.

Then there may have been a couple of years' gap, and that field obviously had to be taken care of. It attracted, at that time, the largest number of students, and perhaps still does. That, to some extent, depends on who is doing the teaching. So that meant we entered a search for someone in the field. Clark, at the time, was at UCLA, and the department at UCLA was Marxist oriented. A very brilliant Marxist theorist had gone to UCLA and became chairman.

GARDNER: Who was that?

ACKERMAN: Otto-Karl Werckmeister. He's now at Northwestern [University]. He made some effort to give

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the department a Marxist flavor in his time, and so there were numerous appointments in that direction. It was much more eccentric then than now. Now every department of any size would have a Marxist. At that time, well, even theory hadn't come into being. Werckmeister brought all of this from the years of the student uprising in Germany. He was already a professor in Germany. I think that explains why UCLA was earlier than other places in admitting that point of view.

Of course, when Harvard made the appointment, it, I believe, had a substantial effect in art history at large, because Harvard's an institution that tends to validate what it does. I can't reconstruct the situation at the time of the appointment. I don't remember whether the department had major problems with it. Tim, very early in his career, had written two very stunning books on Courbet and his time, and those were a great achievement for somebody in his thirties. Putting aside prejudice against the Marxist point of view, I think he would have generally been regarded as a leading candidate. In my opinion, his work has never had the rigor and precision that is usually a basis for our judgment. But, on the other hand, that's partly related to the Marxist point of view, where a sociopolitical agenda might carry an argument farther than documentation sustained, and where the writer usually



takes a parti pris and then undertakes to demonstrate it, which can lead to hiding of evidence or not even thinking to look for it contrary to the final result. This occurs in a less evident way in so-called value-free history. Nonetheless, from the very start, my own opinion was that he was the most stimulating person in the field.

Incidentally, it's important to add that we had, for many years, tried to get Robert Herbert away from Yale [University] and never succeeded. Herbert, while not the kind of Marxist of the sixties generation, was socialistically inclined. His teaching at Yale, which was enormously influential-- His students are everywhere, including the one who came to Harvard as a faculty member, Anna Chave. So the social criticism in nineteenth-century art was not waiting for Tim Clark to enter the field; it was already soundly established. I should say, incidentally, that the Marxist position impacted the study of nineteenth-century art very strongly, just as the feminist position does--more strongly than earlier eras.

GARDNER: Can you explain why?

ACKERMAN: More evidence. And then, of course, after the industrial revolution, there is an evident class struggle which enters into art as it didn't at an earlier age. There was a peasant revolution in northern Europe in the sixteenth century, but the visual evidence of it is slight.



Some of it has been dealt with recently by a Marxist critic now at Columbia [University] called Keith [P. F.] Moxy in a book that he wrote using popular prints [Peasants, Warriors, Wives: Popular Imagery in the Reformation]. But in the high art of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, these things are less apparent, although there have been two medievalists at Hamburg, both of whom have done very effective medieval studies in the Marxist mode.

Werckmeister himself, curiously enough, writes the kind of medieval art history in which you can't detect the Marxist impact. He was the most rabble-rousing of anybody in this country as a theorist or as an antagonist. Everyone knew that if he or she were to be asked to lecture at UCLA, they'd be pinned against the wall by the faculty, that this was its way of welcoming. As soon as the speakers stopped their talk, they'd be attacked violently from the left. So people had to prepare themselves for this eventuality.

GARDNER: Did that happen to you?

ACKERMAN: They never asked me. [laughter]

Well, back again to Tim. I don't recall that, at the time, the faculty was seriously divided. I believe that Sydney [J.] Freedberg, who later became quite an active antagonist to Tim, was not in favor of the appointment. But, as I remember, apart from Herbert, the chief competition came from Theodore Reff at Columbia University.



I think the faculty felt that he was not exciting enough, and so Tim was appointed.

There were some rumblings then in the visiting committee, and this is where the real troubles began. The visiting committee to the department, at that time, was integrated into the visiting committee of the [Fogg Art] Museum. This consisted of about twenty to thirty people who were patrons of the museum, and then the department nominated, for its own purposes, colleagues in other universities who would review the department. But the museum monopolized the attention of the visiting committee when it was combined--it has since been divided, and they meet separately--because the museum always had the kind of problems for which outsiders could assist them, financial contacts and so on. Let's say 60 percent of the people on the committee were wealthy collectors who were interested in the museum and who had been Harvard graduates and who remembered the days when the museum and the department were practically the same thing, when studying the history of art really prepared you to be a collector. It was a course in connoisseurship. These people were very loyal to the museum and to the university and sacrificed a lot for it all, and they exercised an influence. Well, I don't think it ever had anything to do with determining appointments in the department and that



sort of thing, but their presence was felt.

After the appointment of Clark, there were members of the committee who were very disturbed with what also represented a break in the whole tradition that they loved so. And, at the time, whereas we did have professional colleagues as members of the visiting committee to the department, the head was one of the people who had been appointed out of the museum group, Joseph Pulitzer, who was a great collector and who had, first of all, given an enormous gift to the museum of his extraordinary collection of twentieth-century art and a chair in twentieth-century art, which hasn't been filled yet. We've just appointed an individual who will teach twentieth-century art, but the president will decide whether to confer the chair on him. Anyway, the Pulitzer Chair was founded for this purpose. Well, he was also a classmate of Sydney Freedberg's, and they were very close, so their opposition to Tim Clark was a kind of tandem operation.

So there was a lot of this flak before Tim arrived, and he came very much with a chip on his shoulder, feeling that he was in hostile territory. About half of the faculty was not sure whether they really wanted him around, and half was welcoming.

GARDNER: And you were in the--



ACKERMAN: Well, I always thought it was fine. I mean, by that time, I too was strongly influenced by Marxist theory, although I was far from ever being so programmatic. And besides that, I was very fond of Tim. I thought he was a fine person. He, incidentally, I think, inherited his Marxism in the cradle, by contrast to all the others. I think he came from a British working-class union background. In any case, he is an engaged person politically as well as theoretically, whereas you have dozens of people today whose theory doesn't go beyond their writing and their lecturing and who are inactive politically and often indifferent.

Anyway, I think the committee, the visiting committee, wrote either to the overseers or the president complaining about the appointment, and this galvanized the department in Tim's defense. They thought that their prerogatives were being questioned. So there was a very strong counterattack, and that helped to build support within the group for Tim. Tim, because of his feeling of alienation, started out his teaching at Harvard with some rather extreme positions, which I think were fundamentally calculated to épater le bourgeois.

GARDNER: What were some of those positions?

ACKERMAN: I don't remember, as my knowledge isn't firsthand. I would just hear that in lectures he had said



outrageous things. He also objected to having crowds of onlookers, people who were just shopping for lectures, so he tried to get rid of as many people out of his class as possible.

The one thing that worried other members of the department was that he was unreceptive to graduate students who were left over from earlier times in his field. That is to say, graduate students who had started on quite a different tack and who felt that his position was "Either you do it my way or I don't supervise you." And those that were advanced to a certain point could not very easily shift. Besides that, it would take a few years of working with anybody to know how to do it his way. One such person was helped through by three people who weren't in her field. In the course of the time he was there, he moderated his rather extreme early positions and became very attractive to the students. I don't think in the last years that he was there that anybody sought to escape his control in his field, and all through the last years, we would get superior applications because of the people who wanted to come to work with him.

There was a Pissarro exhibition at the Boston museum [Museum of Fine Arts]. One thing that characterizes most writing by Marxists is that they barely look at the work. They do criticisms from photographs, whatever; it's the



content or the program that they talk about. And on the occasion of the Pissarro show, he had the students in the museum all the time and worked over the pictures in a very optical way without any interference from theory. Though the themes he may have had people working on might have been socially oriented, they really got in contact with the works more than they might have with some of the more traditional professors. People were saying that he was a closet Freedberg. I don't know if that ever got back to Sydney Freedberg.

Anyway, I think in the estimate of the rest of the department he became more and more valuable, and I'm almost convinced that, had he stayed, he would have been chairman now. The chairman is appointed by the dean, but only after the dean writes letters to each member of the department asking for their recommendation. So the only reservations, I think, on the part of members of the department would be from those who were jealous of him or felt the heat of his competition. In the age group, there were four people, all of them very competitive with one another. And I guess that's the whole story.

I mean, a certain amount of flak continued, and I think the uproar played a part in the administration deciding to separate the visiting committees of the department and museums. But that was also part of a



radical split between the department and the museum that came after. Two faculty members in succession were directors of the museum. Then it became clear that the museums had to be run by a professional, and a professional was brought in, and this person was not committed to the tradition of interaction between the department and the museums. I think what he wanted to do was to run a successful urban museum within the university and to put the public interests to the fore in a way-- I don't think because he was more civic-minded than his predecessors, but because he saw the trajectory of his career as moving from a small city museum to the Fogg and then on to a larger city museum.

GARDNER: Who was that?

ACKERMAN: Edgar [P.] Bowron. So the department and the museum were separated, and this was underscored by the physical separation. When we built the new Sackler Museum, it was planned that it should have the museum offices and the faculty members related to the fields of the history of art that were represented in the museum: the classical and East Asian and Islamic and so on. They were in this new building, so the faculty in those areas were scheduled to move there, whereas the faculties in Western art were in the Fogg. And after a year or so, a pact was made between the department and the museum,



whereby the museum people would move out and the department would occupy the offices of the new building. That added to the isolation.

Also, they never managed to build the connecting bridge between the two buildings that would have made them more unified, and that was because the Cambridge community didn't want incursion of that kind on its air rights. It would have been an overwhelming construction that was a bit too much. So it had a negative impact on the city council. It happened at the time that there was a Greenpeace city counselor who, though he belonged to the party that would normally support Harvard, voted against. And since they're never in the majority unless they're unanimous, they never could get this through.

Anyway, it was later felt that that separation was a very bad thing, so when they went on a search for the successor of Bowron, the job description brought to the fore the necessity to integrate the museum with the department and teaching. I don't know how much of a turnaround there will be, because there were numerous members of the department who were not interested in using the museum. Also, the two members who were most committed to the museum retired this year, two former directors of the museum, Seymour Slive and John Rosenfield. So there certainly won't be the same kind of symbiosis as there had



been in the past, and that's only natural in this age, the postmodern period. It just is not slated to be, as is beautifully illustrated in the current exhibition at the Whitney [Museum of American Art] biennial, where we visited yesterday--I'm going again today--where works of art are obviously no longer intended to communicate the kinds of values that they did in the past. Maybe you could say they're better integrated with the new theory.

GARDNER: When things started getting difficult for Clark, was it over--? Let me try to reconstruct the chronology. He came in as a department appointment.

ACKERMAN: Yes.

GARDNER: And then had he been promised tenure?

ACKERMAN: No, he came in with tenure.

GARDNER: Then what could the visiting committee do to--?

ACKERMAN: Complain.

GARDNER: And did they just make things uncomfortable enough for him that he chose to go?

ACKERMAN: Oh, no. I don't think that was it. He was there for some time. I don't know how many years. But I guess he always felt a certain bitterness about it. But there were two external factors to his leaving. One was that at [University of California] Berkeley there were two people engaged in theoretical activities who attracted him as colleagues: One, Michael Baxandall, a British scholar



whom we had attempted to appoint a number of years ago-- We couldn't come to any agreement with him because he said he was able to come only half-time, which I think he does at Berkeley. It wasn't suitable to our situation to have a professor in a major field half-time; he could not have supervised dissertations and such things effectively. So the correspondence came to an end. The other one is Svetlana Alpers, who has her degree from Harvard and who is a very dynamic figure, brilliant, and who has an idiosyncratic approach to her own field, which is Dutch and Flemish Renaissance and baroque. She started, along with colleagues in other disciplines, Representations, which is a good new theoretical journal.

So there was another atmosphere to attract Clark, on the one hand, and on the other hand, at the time he was invited, his companion [Anne Wagner] was also invited with tenure (she was an assistant professor at MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology] at the time)--an offer which very few people would turn down. The displeasure he had with Harvard I don't think was in the forefront, because he felt attached to the students who worked with him there, and I wasn't aware of any lack of cordiality within the institute. GARDNER: Did his departure create a different atmosphere in the department? There was obviously, as you mentioned, a split. Did that resolve itself one way or the other?



ACKERMAN: Well, the leading candidate for his successor was a student of Tim's whose viewpoint was the same and who was very sensitive, like Tim, to the difference between himself and traditional Harvard. His name was Tom [Thomas E.] Crow. Tom had been a candidate for promotion to tenure at Princeton [University] and they turned him down, foolishly. John Shearman, chairman at Princeton at the time, was a proponent of Tom's. And the whole flak about his being turned down, which apparently was primarily because people didn't like the way he approached things intellectually, turned John Shearman off so that he was willing to come to Harvard, which he'd turned down at an earlier point. And then at Harvard John was chairman at the time that Tom Crow was a candidate and was very strong for him again.

I think he would have easily been appointed if he hadn't approached the thing in such a defensive way, I mean, given the fact that most of the faculty members didn't really know much about him and only a portion of the faculty settles down and reads the work of somebody who's about to be appointed. He'd been asked to sit with the faculty and talk about his ideas for teaching and for his research in the future. And he did something quite different. I think he presented a little paper or so, and people were put off by the fact that it kept them really



from having a perspective on his intellectual development. Then apparently he offended the students in the meetings he had with them, so that then they sent a delegation to the department asking that he not be appointed. They felt that he would be a very unresponsive teacher (contrary to reports from Princeton). I was in New York at the time, and I would have overridden those objections myself and sided with Shearman, but I think what emerged was really a result of his chip-on-the-shoulder approach. And perhaps, to some extent, that same group of people who were Tim's age felt that they didn't want to feel that kind of competition again.



TAPE NUMBER: X, SIDE TWO

JUNE 12, 1991

GARDNER: You were talking about Tom Crow, who would have been the successor to Tim Clark.

ACKERMAN: Well, it didn't happen. They brought in somebody who I'd been hoping they wouldn't, which I'm unhappy about, who was a very much in vogue theorist by the name of Norman Bryson. He started a journal called Word and Image. He was trained in literature. As far as I can see, he looks at works of art as if they were written. So I was really disappointed. I think Crow would have worked out fine. But I'm not sure he would have stayed, because he left Ann Arbor to return to his native England--Leeds, I believe. So I guess that's the end of the saga that you were asking about.

GARDNER: Well, it's an interesting one, because it did stand Harvard on its side for a little and really created a lot of changes, or a lot of discussion. You've talked about trying to recruit Herbert from Yale. Was that something that the department often did, try to recruit other--?

ACKERMAN: All of our senior people were stolen from somewhere.

GARDNER: How does that happen? What's the process of that? The department gets together and says, "Gee, we'd



like to have such and such. Let's go after him"?

ACKERMAN: Yes. They build up a list of candidates.

First, there's a procedure called a blind letter, which we are required to send out, in which we ask colleagues in the field of the search to comment on, say, six or eight candidates, whom you list, and also to tell you if you overlooked somebody. Normally, you choose a candidate first, and then you put him or her on the list. But also, if you're not certain, or if the situation isn't clear or if the person is in a field in which there aren't experts in the department, you send out your blind letter blindly, just waiting for what people have to say about the various candidates. Frequently, you have a junior faculty member in the field, and you put him or her on the list if you want them to stay, as we did last time with the contemporary appointment. So, as a result of this, you get the opinion of experts. The experts give their input beforehand and afterwards, because they or others of equivalent competence are appointed onto the committee that meets on the department's candidate. So it's all constructed to represent whatever the art historical establishment approves of at that time. It's not a good way to create adventure, although it certainly didn't hamper the appointment of Clark and it didn't keep us from having Crow on the short list, or Bryson for that



matter, the one who got the job.

GARDNER: The other thing you brought up was the notion that nineteenth-century art became the most popular for students. At the time that you first got to Harvard, wasn't Italian Renaissance the hot--?

ACKERMAN: Yeah.

GARDNER: Is there a reason for the change? Is there some way to account for the change in interest over the twenty-year period?

ACKERMAN: The market has an impact. Italian Renaissance came to the fore at the time when people were collecting Italian Renaissance paintings. The impressionists became hot properties. I haven't the time to theorize on how the process works, but it's not unrelated. Then the shift was reinforced with the opening of the new theoretical positions in history and criticism, all of which could be best exercised on the nineteenth century. For example, in the generation before my own, in the work of Meyer Schapiro, who started as a Marxist scholar and wrote for the Marxist Quarterly and such, it was not quite clear when he wrote about the Middle Ages, early in his career, where his Marxist interests intersected with his work. But then when he wrote about the nineteenth century, he brought new views, not only from Marxism but also from Freudian studies, as with his work on Cézanne's Apples and



the like, which started others in that direction. And the other new impulses--e.g., feminist and gay theory--that are characteristic of the eighties also reinforced an interest in the nineteenth century.

The art history of the nineteenth century is myopically focused on France. I don't think there's a survey course in the country which would give anybody a taste of non-French art in the course of the nineteenth century. Or if you look at any of the textbooks that are available, they might mention Caspar David Friedrich or Turner, but people become art historians without the slightest notion of what went on in most of nineteenth-century Germany or in Italy, Russia, Scandinavia, England--a little bit in England, simply because of the community of language, I suppose. You would think that with so many people pursuing the kind of Marxist study that isn't focused on issues of quality and style that a Russian or a Swedish painting would do just as well as an illustration of some issue of art in society as a French one, but that's not how it pans out.

GARDNER: That's something that I suspect is worth a lot of discussion. To what do you attribute that? I guess it is market force. It's the fact that the French impressionists became the blockbusters of the nineteenth century.

ACKERMAN: Well, I think it also has to do with the fact



that, while art history may have been changing, collecting and art loving didn't change all that much. And you could successfully argue that, with not many exceptions, the French impressionists were better than their contemporaries in other European and English-speaking countries and that it's not just caprice that makes Monet sell in the millions while Holman Hunt is in the tens of thousands.

GARDNER: I'd be interested in hearing your thoughts about the place of Harvard's department of art history--and I suppose architecture, too, because we've sloughed off on discussing that--in terms of other departments nationally. What other departments have come to importance since the time you got to Harvard and so on?

ACKERMAN: Well, I think there's more diffusion. Harvard's reputation will sustain it beyond its true eminence, and it still has the potential to bring very good people. There has been some diffusion. For example, I mentioned Berkeley and how what was going on there interested Tim Clark. That has become a very strong department. It's seriously hampered because the rich private universities have a lot more scholarship money and can send their students abroad. I don't know that a single major art historian has ever come out of Berkeley as a Ph.D.

GARDNER: How interesting.



ACKERMAN: First of all, there's not much art to see that's easily available. A student who is going to NYU [New York University] can see every blockbuster show in America, and it's not much harder from Harvard or Johns Hopkins [University] or whatever. [University of] Michigan, which is the major competitor to Berkeley among public universities, has held firm, but it isn't up to the standard of the eastern universities. The NYU [New York University] Institute [of Fine Arts] has slipped a little, has become kind of stuffy, and Princeton has recently undertaken an overdue revival, but I don't think that it would be preeminent. I would say they've all slipped somewhat, but then so has art history in America as a whole.

GARDNER: I can't let you off without defining that a little bit more, saying that art history as a whole has slipped off. Could you elaborate?

ACKERMAN: Oh, I think it's simply the fact that it didn't get as good talent in the last generation as it did before and that people aren't as productive. I think it has to do with social changes, with the kind of experiences that people who are now under fifty have had with the disruptions of the sixties and with the decline in American society in general. The mores have made it hard for people to pursue a career like Seymour Slive and myself and John Rosenfield and Oleg Grabar--who are the



four who retired from Harvard in the last two years--who were very much sustained by our familial situation, with wives who took care of the family and not having the kind of responsibility for the children that I very presently have with Jesse [A. Ackerman]. We could buckle down to work obsessively. There were a lot of people who were obsessive in our times, and that was accepted by our wives. That was one factor.

Another factor is that we were trained by great Europeans who really were giants compared to ourselves and much more so compared to our students. Well, I don't know what else. Everything's worse in this country now. I mean, I don't think I'm talking as an old man, but the movies aren't as good, the theater is deadly dull. Well, perhaps I shouldn't say everything, but a lot is. And those things that depend on a humanistic underpinning, I think, have been very much in decline.

Then the third factor is who goes into fields. Where do the brightest young people choose to move? Well, that's a more iffy question. But I would say, off the top of my head, that we have a much higher average than we had before. That all the people I've worked with recently have tremendous potential. I don't know whether they'll all realize it, but it's there.

It worries me that they take eight years to complete



their Ph.D.'s. Their first job, as assistant professor, has a limit of seven or eight years. By that time they may be fired from their nontenured jobs. It's quite possible. It happens all the time. People are not being anywhere near as productive as people in the previous generations. Now, I would say that there's tremendous potential and talent there, and there are things in the environment blocking people from doing what people did before, and I can't explain them. I guess we need more perspective on our times. And I don't really know how it compares to other disciplines in the humanities, all of which, I think, are suffering to some extent from the same problem.

I didn't mention at all the fact that, since the mid-seventies, the promise of a career as a humanist in a university has declined radically. People really worry about, first, whether they can get a job at all; second, whether the job is going to be a quality job (they've been trained to be research scholars, and it's not much fun to go off to a place which has no books in the library that aren't in English); and third, whether, even if they perform well, they can get promoted to tenure and can continue. I'm not saying that tenure is a great thing. I'm only saying that if you're fired as an assistant professor and don't find another job, your career is over, and there you are, forty-some years old and incapable of doing anything else.



GARDNER: Well, for art historians, there are at least museums, but not many.

ACKERMAN: A forty-two-year-old ex-professor is not as desirable a candidate for the bottom rung of a curatorial department as somebody just out of school who wants to go into museums.

GARDNER: Right. Or a comparative forty-two-year-old who's got twenty years' experience in a museum.

ACKERMAN: That's right.

GARDNER: That's interesting. The notion of the eight-year dissertation is something that I've noted is a change from the day my contemporaries were getting graduate degrees. Do the departments make it more difficult, too? Or is that just a function of--?

ACKERMAN: No. I'm always trying to push people through fast. I tell them, "You don't have to write a book. You don't even have to have a unitary outline. You call it 'Studies in This or That,' and do three or four short-range investigations. Just so long as it demonstrates conclusively that you can do basic research and write it up in a plausible way, I'll sign it off." It doesn't matter what I say. They go ahead, get profoundly buried in archives here and there, and you don't hear from them from one year to the next.

GARDNER: It's interesting. One of the things that I've



noticed among people is the notion that the dissertation is also going to serve as the first book, which causes them to do it in more detail, to think about it as something that they will later publish in order that they can present that to the tenure committee, as you say, years up the road.

ACKERMAN: Yes. I think it's a bad idea for them to think that way, and it doesn't make a good dissertation to try to prepare a book. Well, I know that the Mellon Foundation has been seriously concerned. One of the big jobs that Neil Rudenstine has been doing is to try to find an answer to this and help people get through in time for what they think is going to be the great drought in candidates in the second half of the nineties.

GARDNER: Oh, is that so? When a whole generation retires and there start to be spaces in--?

ACKERMAN: Well, there was a generation that went back to the explosion of funding for the universities in the sixties, and then people got appointed--like myself--and a lot of departments expanded, so that there are lots of people who will be replaced now. In this current recession, they may cut back, but they had expanded so much in the sixties that if they cut back to an earlier time, there still may not be enough people, because the graduate schools diminished their output drastically.



Harvard graduate school cut from 1,500 to 500 admissions a year. And our department, from 35 first-year students to somewhere between 8 and 12. So if we have 8 or 12 come in, we're only putting out about 4 to 8 every year.

GARDNER: Going through the colleges, I noticed that there was one major omission, which was your first alma mater. You never talked about Yale and what its place would be in the great world of art history today.

ACKERMAN: Well, Yale is in radical change. Herbert left to teach in Mount Holyoke [College], where his wife teaches. Vincent Scully, who was a great star at Yale, retired this year. Anne Hanson retired. So they have lost several. The only important addition has been Linda Nochlin to replace Bob Herbert, and that she's the best person who could have done that will attract students there, though she has since left for NYU. But the department overall, I think, is less good than it was a decade ago or twenty years ago.

Columbia has come up very strongly. I think Columbia has a good, vigorous department. It should be a major contender. I think I'd put it up there at or near the top if some student were to ask me. It's quite big, so it has the possibility of considerable depth.

GARDNER: Richard [Cándida Smith], in one of our conversations, gave me names of graduate students who had



passed through Harvard, and you talked about some of them in other contexts. You mentioned Svetlana Alpers before, and we talked about Michael Fried and Rosalind Krauss.

Who were some of the graduate students you've had about whom you would be interested in talking in terms of--?

ACKERMAN: Well, there was a group of women who were contemporaries with Svetlana and Rosalind who were very much the first wave of the confident and equal women. A lot of them had distinguished themselves. Kathleen Weil-Garris Brandt, who is at NYU, has worked in the Renaissance with me and Freedberg and [John] Coolidge and has, I think, been very effective and had good students herself. She hasn't expressed herself in written books, partly because of a constant series of misfortunes in her life of the kind that men never have, such as her second husband having a long bout with cancer and she nursing him through it, and then her parents going through terrible things, too, so that every effort that she makes gets frustrated. But she has become more or less the American liaison with the Vatican and its restoration programs, has worked on the Sistine ceiling, and worked on the Last Supper of Leonardo as a kind of accompanying historian.

Another one is Andree [M.] Hayum, whose book of last year on the Isenheim Altarpiece [The Isenheim Altarpiece:



God's Medicine and the Painter's Vision] has won the College Art Association prize. She teaches at Fordham [University] and has not had a great output but very innovative and interesting work. And Nan Rosenthal, who's the curator of contemporary twentieth-century art at the National Gallery of Art, who taught at [University of California] Santa Cruz prior to that, has become an influential figure in the field of twentieth-century [art]. I had a student of a somewhat later generation named Joanna Woods-Marsden, who is at UCLA, who has been tremendously productive as a scholar in fifteenth-century Italian art and society. And, from the same group, there's Keith [R.] Christiansen, who's the assistant curator of painting at the Metropolitan [Museum of Art], who's worked primarily on fifteenth-century painting. Then a student whom I'm very close to, David Friedman. I haven't mentioned anybody in architecture. He teaches at MIT and has written an important book on town planning in the Middle Ages [Florentine New Towns: Urban Design in the Late Middle Ages].

The most prolific person that worked with me, or I should say worked alongside, because I don't claim that I influenced him very much--he just was around, and not too evident at that--was William [J. R.] Curtis, who writes on contemporary architecture and has been a freelancer and



has made a living out of writing books. He wrote a textbook on contemporary architecture [Modern Architecture since 1900] which is excellent, a book on Le Corbusier [Le Corbusier's Ideas and Forms], a book on a contemporary Indian architect [Balkrishna Doshi: An Architecture for India], and one on [Denys] Lasdun, the British architect [The Work of Denys Lasdun and Partners], and is very much a figure in the active design school. He's now a part-time professor at UC [University of California] San Diego school of architecture.

I would say that it's odd, since I've been teaching history of architecture all this time, that I mentioned people first who do other art. Maybe my presence is oppressive. But I had a lot of students in architecture whom I consider very competent people, but that haven't made breakthroughs in the sense those that I've mentioned have. I've had very good relationships with my students. They gave me a wonderful party on my retirement, at which sixty-five were invited whose dissertations I had either directed or assisted. It was a rather large number for somebody who'd been teaching less than forty years. There were very few in this group who I don't think are doing a fine job. I'm trying to remember if there's anybody who dropped out after doing a dissertation with me. I don't think so. In spite of the hard times, which actually has affected only those in the past decade, everyone I can



think of is in a place which is not the sticks and is producing something. I'm getting offprints all the time.

GARDNER: That's terrific. You've mentioned that you had good relationships with your students. Was it a sort of open-door office? You're such an outgoing, friendly person. Did they stop by your house and things like that?

ACKERMAN: People didn't drop in, but I've always invited people when there was something to talk about and we had to do it for an extensive time. I'd have people for dinner. And then some people visited me in the country and spent more extended time. We had very good relations.

I think my teaching method really was most effective if I just listened to what somebody had to say or read something that somebody put down and commented on it. I didn't really like to hassle them about something which hadn't gelled. I don't know, I think because I felt that their work had to be theirs. Any reasonable plan was okay with me; then we could argue about how it should be done. I never had the benefit that some people had of furthering their own research by giving pieces of it to graduate students. That never seemed profitable because it always appeared important to have somebody find a subject for themselves. On some occasions, if a person would be unable to come up with anything, I'd say, "Look into this or that." They'd do it, but sometimes it wouldn't work so



well--it would be inhibiting to them. But I don't think I very often lost people because of incompatibility.

GARDNER: How did your attitude or relationship compare with that of your colleagues in the department?

ACKERMAN: Well, the strongest personality was probably Sydney Freedberg. He had a particular way of looking at things, and people tended to follow him. He had tremendous personal magnetism, and people naturally fell into his idiosyncratic mode. He didn't put people onto things for his own benefit, but they tended to get entranced by him and then do it his way. And I think he was welcoming to those who didn't, though they knew that he didn't approve quite as much of their way of going about it as another way. It didn't turn him on.

Seymour Slive was a very dynamic teacher but nowhere near as open. He guarded his time jealously, and people felt that they were interrupting him in his work. But once they chose him, he followed them intently. So he had fewer students, but the ones that he had became very soundly grounded.

I was a sucker as well as being generous. I'd catch all the dissertations that nobody else wanted, if it was in photography or if it was in cinema or whatever, regardless of whether I knew anything about it. Everybody else would turn these people down, and they would end up



in my office. I don't know how much good that did them.

GARDNER: When a student would finish the dissertation, would you then help find a location for the student to go?

ACKERMAN: I work over the students until they retire.

[laughter] Yeah, they're dependent forever. [tape recorder off] There's always something in my "In" box relating to a student who wants a grant or a promotion. But that's the same way with everybody, except that everybody didn't have sixty-five Ph.D. students. Then, on top of that, all other kinds-- The latest thing I have to do is a recommendation for a promotion for somebody at the University of Chicago. I hardly know anything about this person's work except that it's in Renaissance architecture. And those things happen also, I guess, pretty widely. But I do think they probably happen more to me.

GARDNER: It's an evaluation rather than a recommendation? Or is this student asking for a--?

ACKERMAN: Yes. You get very annoying requests, such as when a university's regulations require that they have a folder of letters. And they don't care what the letter is. If you sent your letterhead and said, "Write your own," it could probably work just as well. At the University of California, they even do it when they have



to promote somebody from one salary level within the full professor rank to the next. [laughter] Those are the ones that really piss me off.



TAPE NUMBER: XI, SIDE ONE

JUNE 12, 1991

GARDNER: What I'd like to ask you about is the role of the other places that Harvard [University] has. To start off with, [Villa] I Tatti and what impact that has on the department and what your role has been with it.

ACKERMAN: It has no impact on the department because at I Tatti we don't send students. The competition for the grants at I Tatti are from junior faculty or sometimes senior faculty from all over, in other countries as well, and they're in five different fields of Renaissance studies. So there really isn't much of a relationship to the department. The department graduates have very frequently gone there, and I think, all the qualifications being equal, they would be favored in the competition. We've had arguments on the appointment committee on that basis. Some of the non-Harvardians think it's unfair to favor Harvard. Sydney [J.] Freedberg always held that, with all Harvard invests in this institution, if there are two candidates who you think are both very good, it's not heinous to favor the Harvard one. But it's been a pretty successful establishment in the sense of bringing people together in Renaissance studies and furthering the tendency in that field to be interdisciplinary. They learn a lot from each other and from the fact that it's

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international. There was a year recently when there were more non-Americans than Americans. It's characteristic that a third or more are from other countries.

GARDNER: Do Harvard professors have sort of free access to it?

ACKERMAN: They're welcome to visit, but, for extended periods, they haven't frequently done so. The present director [Walter Kaiser] wants to invite people for a semester and has asked me to let him know if I can come. There has always been a conflict between the [Bernard] Berenson shrine and the character of the place as a country house with faded but nonetheless obvious elegance with fabulous works of art around, on the one hand, and the functions of a study institute on the other--much more so than it is at some other places. For example, the other one that is relevant to our discussion is Dumbarton Oaks.

GARDNER: That was going to be next.

ACKERMAN: . That's a huge mansion in the middle of a city, which, although it's very palatial, doesn't affect people's lives quite as much as this more intimate family-type place at I Tatti with a small number of fellows who have lunch in the dining salon with Sassettas on the wall and who might easily fall into the obsolete way of life. [laughter] For a long time, the people who helped--the



housekeepers and the like--who were Berenson's staff referred to the fellows there as gli studenti, as if they belonged to this juvenile level. And then, of an evening, the entertainment on the part of the director will always have something of the character of an old-world dinner. So it's not easily shaken off. But one could hardly recommend that the pictures be taken down and the furniture be put in storage and the thing be remade as an institutional center. But, contrary to my expectations--and I had always felt that it would become tainted by all these things--the impact on Renaissance studies has been excellent. It has promoted a broadening of scope for many people, and I think a person who went there as a narrow archivist or the like might have his or her eyes opened.

GARDNER: I surmised that the notion is that the people live there and then use--

ACKERMAN: They don't live in. There are a few apartments that they can rent that are Harvard property, but the majority of them live out.

GARDNER: They live out and then come there during the day to do research?

ACKERMAN: Come during the day and have lunch together.

GARDNER: I guess what I'm trying to do is figure out exactly what happens within I Tatti itself.

ACKERMAN: Well, they each have studies, and they work



there whenever they have study-type things to do. A lot of them are working primarily in the libraries or archives in Florence or even in outlying cities. We've had people there who were working on Venetian problems. And there are certain regulations about the amount of time they're expected to be in residence. But they're in and out, let's say.

GARDNER: The notion is to create a place where they can have this interchange of ideas.

ACKERMAN: Yes.

GARDNER: I see. How about Dumbarton Oaks? What happens there?

ACKERMAN: Well, Dumbarton Oaks is different in other ways, being not all devoted to allied disciplines. There's Byzantine studies, which is the major occupation; there's landscape studies around the library, which Mrs. [Mildred Barnes] Bliss had built to document landscape history; and there's pre-Colombian studies around the collection that they have of pre-Colombian art. They appoint fellows in each one of those fields. They have a residence there for single fellows, and they have a library, and they have lunch together. Same kind of thing, but much less cohesive because of the mixed nature. They've always had more administrative problems there than at I Tatti, partly because of the spread of subjects.



GARDNER: Are the directors considered members of the Harvard faculty? Or are they--?

ACKERMAN: At one point a few years ago, the director was a diplomat who had had administrative experience. Presently, the director [Angelike Laion] is a professor of history at Harvard. It has varied in that sense.

GARDNER: Interesting. Have you spent much time there? You've had no reason to.

ACKERMAN: No. The only contact I've ever had is on the occasion this spring when I was asked to do a paper in the landscape symposium.

GARDNER: Oh, right.

ACKERMAN: And I've never used the landscape library, although it's the best in the country, or maybe in the world. I immediately got involved in the politics of it, because the head of the landscape division, who had called this symposium together, resigned. He wasn't able to get along with the director, who's a Byzantinist and who he claims is trying to push the landscape program against the wall. So, after this meeting, I wrote to the new Harvard president [Neil Rudenstine] and the acting dean [Henry Rosovsky] telling them that there was a danger that, in the appointment of a new head of the landscape, they might not seek a person of equal stature, and that this was important to do, because this person, who's the outstanding



figure in the world in this field, had given a real boost to landscape studies.

GARDNER: Who is that?

ACKERMAN: John Dickson Hunt is his name. He's British and his home is in Britain. But he moved from Dumbarton Oaks to Mrs. [Mary C.] Mellon's library in Virginia--a real sinecure, where he doesn't have to do so much work and has equal opportunity to build a fine library. And then, within the Byzantine field, there have always been problems. The problem of the directorship is difficult. If a Byzantinist from Harvard goes there, it cuts Byzantine teaching in half, because there are only two in the history department who teach Byzantine.

GARDNER: That's a large number, anyway. What about your own art collecting?

ACKERMAN: I bought drawings from the time I went abroad as a student. Not so much since, because then, with the top limit of five dollars, I could get great master drawings. But I have regularly bought works of art over the past. Easel paintings I acquired mostly from friends, because it costs too much to buy them in the market. In the case of friends' paintings, my attachment to the authors would overcome the fact that they might not be equal to what I would have bought had my funds been unlimited. But we haven't totally avoided the



market. When we were in New York last year, we bought a drawing out of a show and a watercolor from another one, one by Austrian architects and one by a German conceptual artist.

GARDNER: So you buy without necessarily a collecting policy, I guess is the way to put it.

ACKERMAN: Yeah. I mean, with Jill [Slosburg-Ackerman], none of my interests go in different directions from what they did with Mildred [Rosenbaum Ackerman]. We've also bought a photograph and a piece of jewelry this year, both of them stimulated by Jill's interests, but that's about it. We stay inside of \$1,500, and we don't purchase a lot. In any case, we don't have enough wall space for what we have. I distributed a large proportion of things to my older children when I got married the second time. Jill quite wisely said that at the time when she loses me, she didn't want to lose everything around her, and that I should ask the children to come and get objects then. This, I think, was a very sound thing to do, but it offended the children terribly.

GARDNER: Why so?

ACKERMAN: They said that this is a statement that I'm dispensing with them as well as getting married.

GARDNER: Ah, curious.

ACKERMAN: You know, settling accounts, good-bye. I never



anticipated that.

GARDNER: Well, I guess we ought to-- Since we've now come into a discussion on it, we should bring your personal life up to date. Really, when we last talked about Mildred was when you moved back to Cambridge in 1959, '60, '61, whenever that was. Could you talk a little about your kids growing up and what happened in the next quarter century while you were--?

ACKERMAN: Well, they were all very interested in the arts: two of them in music and Anne [Ackerman], the eldest, in theater. Tony [Anthony Ackerman] went for a year and a half to Harvard and then got discouraged by the student revolution and his own abortive encounter with it. Then he went off to Italy to live and came back here one summer, met his present wife, and then they went back to Italy and got married over there. I can't remember what he lived on. [laughter] Then he went to college only after seven years--he was at the age of twenty-six or so, married and with children--and went to graduate school, too.

Anne came to New York and has been here for decades. Married a screenwriter. The youngest, Sarah [Ackerman], was with us the longest, of course, and came to Italy the many times that I went there on sabbaticals. She got an advanced degree writing music for theater in an NYU [New



York University] program, but gave that up because there was no way to do it without writing corny Broadway shows, and even that wasn't a real option for a woman. So she's become a family therapist.

I have two grandchildren by Tony, fifteen and eleven.

GARDNER: Where's he living now?

ACKERMAN: In Prague. He and his wife, who was Czech originally--she became an American citizen while she was doing college in California in those interim years--they went back on a fellowship and decided to stay. They've been there now for seven or eight years. He's come back in the last two years to teach in California in the school where my older grandson is a student.

GARDNER: Which one?

ACKERMAN: It's called the Athenian School, near Oakland/Berkeley. He now has returned to Prague and is trying to find an occupation that will pay him American money, because a well-paying job in Prague translates to three hundred dollars a month. He has an opportunity to do interesting work with a radio station there that was started by his performing partner, but that's where the financial differences are telling.

And Mildred-- An important part of my engagement with film was that Mildred became a film editor and made some films of her own. The films that I got involved with at

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Harvard I was really prompted to do so that she and I could work together.

GARDNER: What were some of the films that she had done? What kind of films?

ACKERMAN: Well, she did short documentaries. Not a lot, because she couldn't handle a camera from a wheelchair, so she had to have other people do it. That was a drawback.

GARDNER: That's interesting that's what got you into film, because I was going to talk about film later and ask you about that.

ACKERMAN: Well, I would say that I got in first, and then, through the contacts I began to make, she got interested.

GARDNER: And then, subsequently, she died in 1986?

ACKERMAN: She got breast cancer in '81 and was treated for a year or so, and then it was in remission for about three years, and then it came back again and metastasized. And then, on top of that, in late '85 she got this kind of relapse that a lot of the people who had gotten polio in 1952 got, and she began to deteriorate seriously in muscle function. Quite apart from the cancer, from the early summer of '85 on, she was increasingly helpless. She couldn't get in and out of bed by herself. So I'd have to be standing by her all the time.

GARDNER: That must have been extraordinarily difficult



for both of you in a way, because she, having been a dancer, a person of great motor skills--

ACKERMAN: Yeah. Well, of course, the polio was difficult all this time, but this last manifestation was very anxious-making. If the cancer hadn't done her in, she was looking forward to a rather bad future.

GARDNER: Of deterioration.

ACKERMAN: Yeah. My niece literally stopped breathing-- she who also got polio in the same epidemic--and claims that she died and came back to life and is kind of clairvoyant as a result.

GARDNER: Oh, my. I'll have to get her address before we go. [laughter] How did you meet Jill?

ACKERMAN: How did I meet--?

GARDNER: How did you meet Jill?

ACKERMAN: Oh, that's a very nice story.

GARDNER: I figured we need one now.

ACKERMAN: In 1984 I gave the commencement address-- ruminations on Orwell's 1984--and received an honorary degree at Massachusetts College of Art in Boston, where Jill teaches metalwork. We didn't meet at that time, but she was present.

Then in 1986, she got a fellowship to the Bunking Institute, which is administered by Radcliffe [College]. That gives grants in residence to a variety of achieving



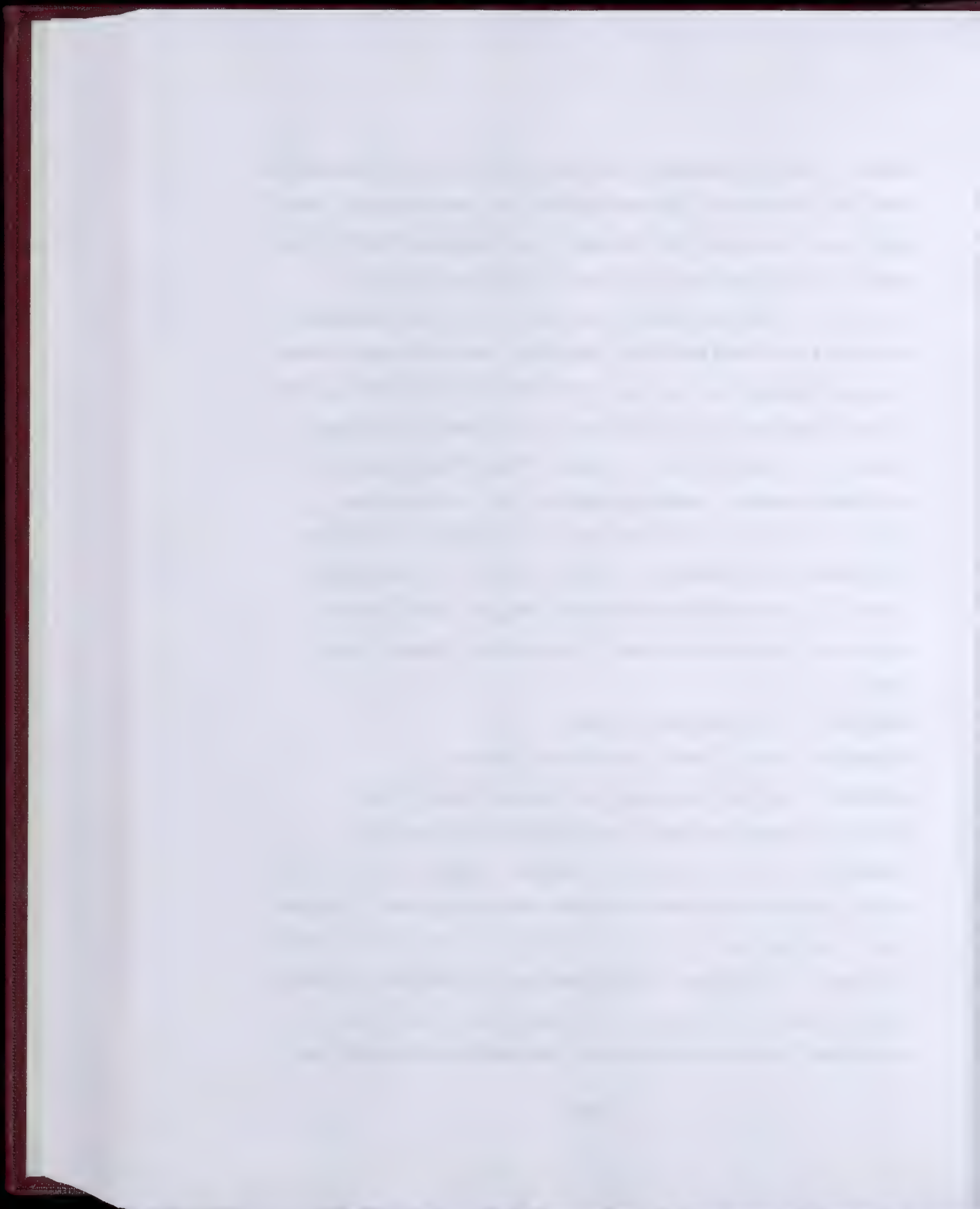
women. And on occasion, the institute sets up dinners and asks the fellows to invite members of the community that they know or would like to meet. So because she liked my talk, she invited me. Oh, and in the interim I had invited all the Bunting fellows in art to the screening of our new Frank Stella film. And that was much appreciated, because Harvard, as a rule, ignores Radcliffe enterprises. So she asked me to this dinner, and we had a pleasant evening. I was really in a poor state recovering from Mildred's death. Nothing happened for a while, but I began to feel the need for some friendship, and I'm not very good at friendship, with men anyway. I had hardly anybody in the Harvard community who was close to me-- certainly nobody with whom I would share anguish over a loss.

GARDNER: I'm surprised at that.

ACKERMAN: Yeah. Well, I've never been--

GARDNER: And yet you have that close friend from Berkeley [Jesse Reichek], who's obviously been a--

ACKERMAN: Yes. A couple, a couple. Anyhow, after a few weeks, there was a dance concert coming up, and I invited her to go with me. She asked later on, "Was that a date?" [laughter] And then, during summer, I asked her to come up to Vermont to visit. For a very long time I was convinced that this was a very implausible pairing--the



age difference being twenty-nine years--and that it was simply for conversation and congeniality. And I'd often say, "Well, it's so nice to know that one can be real friends with a person of the opposite sex without any other thing going on." And then, as you might expect, something else started to go on. [laughter] So it wasn't too long before we were shuttling back and forth between each other's houses--by maybe November or December of '86. Then we got married the next summer.

GARDNER: That is a nice story. It's something that grew out of a coincidence and then a friendship. That's really nice. And Jesse [A. Ackerman] came along?

ACKERMAN: Yeah. Jesse [born August 1989] will be two, and it will be our fourth anniversary shortly before. They're a week apart.

GARDNER: Oh, that's nice. That makes it easier to remember.

Well, in the last few minutes before we wait for Jesse to come back-- I still probably have a whole other tape to do, but we'll deal with that later. It's interesting that you mentioned the honorary degree, because I'm interested in some of the honors that you've earned along the way. I've listed them chronologically. I pulled them from your Who's Who [in America] reference, so some of them you may not be interested in even talking

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SIGN OF THE BARR, IN THE
CITY OF BOSTON.
1790.

about, but I'll bring them up and then we can see. The first one that I found was a fellowship that you got to King's College at Cambridge [University] in 1969-70.

ACKERMAN: The fellowship was corollary to the Slade professorship.

GARDNER: Oh, okay. Can you talk about how that happened?

ACKERMAN: The king's fellowship was an honorary thing that went with the professorship. It was arranged by a friend, Michael Jaffe, the reader in art history and a king's don. The Slade professor at Oxford [University] and Cambridge is usually a distinguished person in art, either practical or historical/theoretical. And it's an honor to be invited as a foreigner. You're supposed to stay for two terms and to give two series of public lectures. So I was really excited by it.

GARDNER: I'm sure. What was Cambridge like after being in the other one [Cambridge, Massachusetts]?

ACKERMAN: Well, it always seemed very foreign, just belonging to another world. I wasn't really involved as much as I would have liked, because there wasn't a practical way even to do the research for the lectures in Cambridge. I used the Warburg Institute primarily, the library there, and the British Museum, and so on. And also because finding a place where Mildred could be comfortable seemed less likely in Cambridge, although what



we found in London she wasn't at all comfortable in. It was a really tough time for her, because there was a flat in an apartment house that had a stairway, and she couldn't get out unless somebody came and helped her. And it was beastly cold in the wintertime: only one radiator in the entranceway of this flat. We had to huddle around the radiator.

But it was really very picturesque. The one night that I spent in Cambridge each week was in an eighteenth-century building by James Gibbs in a splendid room that looked out on the quad with the famous King's Chapel on one side. I got inducted into the professorship kneeling before the pulpit in King's Chapel.

GARDNER: Oh, my. With a sword on the shoulder?

ACKERMAN: Almost. [laughter]

GARDNER: Did you have anything to do with students other than your lectures?

ACKERMAN: I did. Each semester, besides the public lectures, I did a course on Renaissance architecture. Students there don't take courses in the sense that they hand in papers and take exams. They come, and they discuss. Some of them were exceedingly well prepared, and they were harder to handle than American students.

GARDNER: Why? Just more independent?

ACKERMAN: Presumptuous, I would say. They tended to show



off more. But then, American students don't often have much to show. [laughter] Of course, British students are not liberal arts students. They study just one thing, so they do tend to know quite a lot about that one thing. A lot of them came from public schools. The social exclusivity of Cambridge hadn't broken down quite as much then as it has since.

GARDNER: What about the Cambridge faculty? Did you have much to do with them?

ACKERMAN: Well, we had high table at dinner, and I chatted with numerous people. Some of them were not at all accessible. I mean, I'd frequently sit at dinner and nobody would address a word to me. [laughter] The high table is literally high; it's on a dais above the dining hall. They eat different food from what's served to the students, very elegant. The wine was fabulous. My sponsor there, Michael Jaffe, who is now the director of the Fitzwilliams [Museum], was from a family which cultivated wine in the Rhineland. He was the wine steward for King's College, and he created an incredible cellar. People would have these marvelous wines at dinner, and then they'd retire to the fellows' room, and a selection of wines and cordials would be in the little silver train that would be pulled along the table, and they'd all drink themselves into a stupor. I could never see how they got



as much done as they did. Some of them were productive scholars.

Running King's College was like running a corporation. The college was the beneficiary of holdings throughout the realm, including abbeys and Eton College and benefices all over the place and agricultural land. The fellows, on top of their research and teaching, were administering a vast empire.

GARDNER: Really? How curious.

ACKERMAN: And always drunk. [laughter]

Oh, and I met E.M. Forster, who was in residence there.

GARDNER: Really?

ACKERMAN: He was always happy to talk because he'd gotten a little bit dotty in his last years, and his colleagues were solicitous, but not much interested in carrying on conversations with him. So he was very accessible.

GARDNER: He was the one person who would talk to you.

ACKERMAN: Yes. [laughter] I was a teenage admirer of his, and to get to know him before his death was very special.

GARDNER: Were you working on anything special in those days, '69-'70?

ACKERMAN: Well, the two series I lectured on were both major interests. One was on art and science in the



Renaissance, and the other was on the development of the city in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. They were themes that I made use of in writing. They didn't turn into books, but--

GARDNER: Well, this was also the period that you were changing your perspective, too, so it was an interesting time for you to be abroad. Now, what about that? Here we are in the late sixties, turning into the seventies, and 1968 was just a year before. England was in sort of the throes of social change in a lot of different ways. You'd left behind Harvard, where there were certain things going on. What was your sense of the social change? Did that have any effect on you?

ACKERMAN: No, I didn't have much of an opportunity to observe this. I guess life was confined by the fact that it was a real hassle to get these lectures together, which I thought had to really be something special. The moment one was given, I'd have to dive in and try to get the next one done. And then, with the really bad situation for Mildred, I wanted to get her out as much as was possible.

GARDNER: But I wonder, too, if it isn't possible--only, I guess, because we've been talking for over two hours do I have the nerve to put out a comment like this--that Cambridge is so much more elitist than either American colleges or any of the other kinds of colleges around,



that it was, in a sense, withdrawn from the kinds of social turmoil that you would have been facing in American universities.

ACKERMAN: Yes, that's true. There was no real evidence of this there, though I think this attitude of the students that I spoke of is probably the one piece of evidence that I could interpret that way.



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GARDNER: The last thing we had talked about was your fellowship at King's College. I'd like to go from there to something that you will probably be able to talk about more briefly, a doctorate in fine arts that you received from the Maryland Institute [of Fine Arts] in 1972. Can you talk about how that came about?

ACKERMAN: I don't know. It just came out of the blue. I wonder if it wasn't an offshoot of work that I did in the '69-'72 period on the arts and higher education. I did part of a Carnegie Foundation report that was directed by Carl Kaysen, who at the time was the head of the Princeton [University] Institute for Advanced Study, on issues in higher education. I wrote about the arts in higher education. I'd done another job for I think it was also Carnegie--I can't remember--called "The Arts on Campus," which was devoted exclusively to the arts, under the direction of Maggie [Margaret Ellerbe] Mahoney, who was subsequently director of the [Robert Wood] Johnson Foundation.

GARDNER: Right. Whom I happened to have interviewed last Thursday in New York, as a matter of fact. [laughter]

ACKERMAN: Well, I really liked her. I had a good time doing that work. But I went through a period--and I think it was related to my attempt to kind of reorient myself

THE HISTORY OF THE CITY OF BOSTON

The history of the city of Boston is a subject of great interest and importance. It is a city of many centuries, and its history is a record of the growth and development of one of the most important cities in the world. The city has been the seat of many great events, and its history is a record of the progress of the human race. The city has been the home of many great men, and its history is a record of the achievements of the human mind. The city has been the center of many great movements, and its history is a record of the struggles of the human spirit. The city has been the birthplace of many great ideas, and its history is a record of the progress of the human race. The city has been the home of many great men, and its history is a record of the achievements of the human mind. The city has been the center of many great movements, and its history is a record of the struggles of the human spirit. The city has been the birthplace of many great ideas, and its history is a record of the progress of the human race.

after the crisis of the late sixties in the university-- when I didn't find it easy to do the kind of ordinary art history that I'd been doing before, and I was trying to think my way through to a new approach. So I spent some time there occupying myself as an advocate of the arts in higher education.

At that time, also, I did a couple of jobs in relation to art schools. I was cochairman of a committee to recommend to the University of Massachusetts an arts program for the future. We had a very high-powered committee that worked for two years on the project, which was subsequently thrown away because the trustee of the university who had stimulated it got into a conflict with the head of the trustees and resigned in disgust. Because the work that we'd been doing coincided with that event, it just was completely forgotten. I was pretty sore.

GARDNER: No doubt.

ACKERMAN: Then I had a couple of jobs related to evaluating art schools. One was the one at the University of Hartford. So I got very much involved in that particular aspect.

I have already discussed my involvement with a report on the arts at Harvard [University], which was half successful, and not the half that I cared most for. But then, Harvard is not a place where you expect art to flourish. Even at Yale [University], which has one of the



finest graduate art schools in the country, the rub-off onto the undergraduate program is very modest. Harvard did already have at that time the Carpenter Center [for the Visual Arts] and the Department of Visual Studies, where they teach film and photography and drawing and painting and sculpture. I think, up to the late sixties, this was all done at-- The word "visual studies" was meant to be an analogue of historical studies or something of the sort, and there was an effort to give it respectability by having it be the same kind of discipline as the humanities, which inhibited it a great deal. It's not easy to work with such constraints. And it did eventually shake loose, but the situation is not favorable to really serious work, because the most that happens in many sequences of courses is that the student is offered an elementary and advanced course in, let's say, drawing or painting. So that, by the time that student is finished, he or she is in about the same situation as a sophomore in an undergraduate art school. Anyone who wants to be an artist has to go somewhere else. Of course, that makes it difficult to get the finest faculty, because candidates don't want to teach only beginners. I neglected to say about that program at Harvard that the film and photography were more successful and that quite a number of interesting filmmakers came through the program.



Well, I'm off the track. I was talking about my time as an adviser to these various organizations about the arts in higher education, in which I recommended strong art programs because I thought it was another way of knowing and that it was particularly useful in the research institutions, where people tend to get specialized and professionalized and needed that counterbalance. I never saw any virtue in the [Derek C.] Bok recreational point of view. To me, the practice of art served to develop an aspect of the mind and of vision that was other than what you got out of books.

Then later on, in writing an article about criticism, I got involved in the study of what had gone on with left brain and right brain research, and I found that the evidence was fairly persuasive that the locus of formal structure was different from that of verbal and mathematical analysis, and that this would also give a physiological basis for justifying the study of art as the development of mind. So that may explain that art school degree.

GARDNER: So the Maryland Institute just called you up and said, "We'd like you to have a degree"?

ACKERMAN: Yes. And I think it was there that I had the honor of sharing the degree with Josef Albers and his wife



Anni [Albers], who had been so fundamentally important in American art education, first at Black Mountain [College] and then at Yale.

GARDNER: You were an NEH [National Endowment for the Humanities] fellow from 1974 to 1975, according to my notes. Were you working on the same kinds of research for that?

ACKERMAN: No. By that time, I was back to my art history, now altered by a kind of reorganized vision of my role and of my theoretical underpinnings. I was in Rome at the time and made the film on Renaissance Rome there with Kathleen Weil-Garris Brandt. And my friend John Terry, the cinematographer, and his girlfriend, Amy Jones, who then became an assistant to Martin Scorsese and went to Hollywood and made a film and-- Unfortunately, I think that was the last opportunity she got. Women don't do very well in Hollywood. I'm trying to remember whether I did anything effective at that time. I do remember that-- I think it was on that occasion that I was working on a study of the urban development of Rome in the Renaissance, which never came to fruition. And I must have had some project that did get published, but I'd have to look at the bibliography to identify what it was. I guess 1975 was the first time that Mildred [Rosenbaum Ackerman] and I went abroad without children, and we stayed at the



wonderful accommodations at the American Academy [in Rome], in the garden of the villa, which was just fabulous. Well, I know I worked hard, but I can't remember why. [laughter] And the film occupied quite a lot of time and energy. I had the intention to make a film under the aegis of the collaborative effort of the [Fogg Art] Museum and the Department of Fine Arts at Harvard. We set up an organization to be a filmmaking unit. I thought that if I was going to make one film in that series, I ought to have a go at doing a film by myself to learn the ropes. Mildred had studied editing with John Terry and was very much involved. It was a great boon to her, since, being in a wheelchair, her opportunities to be active in something useful were limited, and the children were gone, so this became her activity. She also edited other of the Fogg Museum series. And we brought John, who was her teacher, and Amy over to Rome. Now, when I did make a film for Harvard, it cost in the neighborhood of \$85,000, and this one we had to try to do on a level that I could afford. Personally, it cost, I think, \$18,000, which is remarkably little.

GARDNER: Now, which film is this?

ACKERMAN: This is the one called Looking for Renaissance Rome.

GARDNER: So you financed the film, then?



ACKERMAN: Yes.

GARDNER: So you, I guess, acted as producer.

ACKERMAN: Mildred and I and Kathleen didn't take money, and John and Amy didn't, either. They just got the trip and provisions.

GARDNER: Your role was that of a producer, more or less, then.

ACKERMAN: Well, also cowriter. And Kathleen and I appear in the film, which is a tour of Rome through the old quarter, the two of us walking here and there and talking to each other about what we see or at times appearing along on screen.

GARDNER: Was it well used when it was put together?

ACKERMAN: Reasonably, yes. I mean, maybe it went twenty, twenty-five times a year.

GARDNER: That's great.

ACKERMAN: Yes. So you can assume an audience in the many thousands, since with each viewing you might get fifty to a hundred people.

GARDNER: How long a film was it?

ACKERMAN: Twenty-eight minutes. We chose lengths that were adapted to television.

GARDNER: Did it get on?

ACKERMAN: I think it did. I don't remember which ones made it to television. It wasn't slick enough for most



television requirements. That is, with a budget that size, you couldn't do anything fancy. For example, if a walking tour were being done on a normal budget, they would have dollies or at least Steadycams carrying the camera. We never had anything except John, who was very adept at walking backwards. We actually looked into a Steadycam for the Palladio: [The Architect and His Influence in America] film, but we would have had to rent it from Munich at a huge price and arrange the difficult transportation, and so it didn't seem right.

GARDNER: Palladio is your second film, then.

ACKERMAN: The second one I did. I produced all of them, and Mildred edited all but one.

GARDNER: Palladio seems like the obvious topic for you since you had spent so much time writing about him. How did you go about developing the film?

ACKERMAN: Well, I had a kind of framework from my book [Palladio (1966)], in which I divided it into parts according to the type: villas, churches, and palaces. And that accounts for almost all of Palladio's work. We then, I think, wrote out a rough script, enough to be a basis on which we could calculate that we would go to such and such a place at such and such a time. You have to get a schedule, so you shoot according to what's close and how far you can get in a given day. So, on the

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basis of the shooting script, we got ourselves a schedule. And part of the plan, which I was particularly happy about later, was to make two trips, one in winter and one in the spring, so that we had an interesting variety illustrating the different effects that the buildings had in different climatic and light conditions. The winter was particularly compelling, because the Venetian area is very misty and mysterious in the wintertime, quite a contrast to the splendor of the full sunshine. We even got the very rare occasion of snowfall while we were at the Villa Rotunda, so we got rare views of the villa in the snow. Also, with the winter you don't have trees getting in the way of buildings to the same extent. Anyway, for the shooting script we would go and improvise.

One thing that happened in this film is that I was shot on numerous occasions standing in front of a building talking about it, and all that was cut out because it didn't work. It's a problem with all filmmaking on subjects of art that if you look at the narrator you're not looking at the object. I can remember, I did seventeen takes of talk in front of Palladio's basilica at Vincenza, and they all had to go. Because if I was going to be bigger than a flyspeck on a screen so that you could see that I was actually talking, then the amount of basilica you saw was practically nil. So we eliminated



all that, and I appeared only in two little slices where I'm in the library talking about Palladio's writings and showing illustrations from his books. The rest of it is voice-over.

GARDNER: How did you feel about the adaptation of your critical-historical art into filmmaking? It's a completely different frame of reference.

ACKERMAN: Well, first of all, I was excited by the medium, and perhaps I never would have been so involved if it hadn't been for Mildred's engagement in it. And I liked working with her, too. In the editing of Palladio, we went off to Vermont and worked in rooms side by side, she with the editing machine, which we transported up there, and me with pen and pencil. I would bring her a rewritten passage, and she would try to fit it into the best footage. Or it would go the other way around. She would have a good sequence of images which required the narration to be three seconds shorter. So then I'd go back and I'd write the narration without those three seconds.

GARDNER: And you did the voice-over.

ACKERMAN: Yes. I actually went to study voice in preparation for this.

GARDNER: Well, you have a terrific, resonant voice.

ACKERMAN: Well, I don't know how much of the lessons stuck, but during the narration I was right in the midst



of these studies, and so I could do better.

Anyway, the intellectual reason was that I'd seen numerous films about art, and, as far as I can remember, at that time almost none of them had been done by people who knew what they were talking about. There were two types: There was the type where a film company would decide, "Oh, it would be great to shoot Versailles." They'd go out and do it, and whatever they said about it was either wrong or not sufficiently informative. Or an art historian would write a script, and then some film actor would narrate it who didn't know what he was saying. That difference is very important. And then I suppose I was also inspired by my admiration for Kenneth Clark's "Civilization" series.

Just last weekend I was at a conference on film on art, because it's become a big deal now. The Getty [Center for the History of Art and the Humanities] and the Metropolitan Museum [of Art] joined in an organization called the Program for Art on Film and sponsored this meeting along with Tufts University. The program has been sponsoring the making of films by bringing together filmmakers and art historians. I think I made one step towards this much increased interest in it. And also, because our films were coming out of Harvard, they legitimized the professional involvement. People are, perhaps justifiably, very scared to do something which will be



thought in the profession to be wasting their time.

ACKERMAN: Or trivial.

GARDNER: Yes. Those of us who did these films at Harvard were all beyond the point where we had to worry about what they thought of us, but younger people never would have dared then. In fact, in the Program for Art on Film, about half of the people who were involved were junior faculty members, some of them still, who thought the risk was worth taking. So that if I had anything to do with legitimizing that kind of activity, I'm happy about it. But it's a lot of fun. The evolution, partly through the organization of the Getty and the Metropolitan, has been toward more interpretative film rather than didactic, and I feel this, to some extent, is another genre and that-- Well, it's a big question about whether there's real legitimacy to what we set out to do, which was to give an enriched university lecture where you could see buildings in three dimensions and so on. We didn't try any films about two-dimensional art because it's so difficult to make it effective. Instead of Palladio, if we'd decided to do Titian, it would have been an overwhelming problem, because painting isn't mobile and cinema isn't a necessary vehicle of interpretation. So many films about painting that I've seen are really classy slide shows that show you the whole picture and then zoom in and show you parts of



the picture, just as a slide lecture will show you the whole and then have a slide of a part. This zoom-in is not worth the difference between a hundred and a hundred thousand dollars of equipment.

GARDNER: One thing I'm curious about before I go back into my chronological sense-- This is a very personal kind of reaction; I don't know if it can be proven in any way. But it appears to me that there is another dichotomy between filmmakers--Kenneth Burns and so on--and the academics or subject specialists. Do you run into that in art history as well?

ACKERMAN: Oh, yes. During this conference last weekend, they were fighting with one another. When an art historian gave a critique of one of the films of the Program for Art on Film, he was really attacked by the filmmakers. He was really set up. He was a young man who I think didn't know what he was getting into and essentially complained about the fact that the film he was addressing couldn't be used in class to inform people about the object that it portrayed, which was quite true. It was a film on the Trevi Fountain in Rome. There was a long sequence of maintenance people sweeping up the pennies that people throw into the fountain and then an interview with a typical American tourist who explained why they came there. There were all kinds of things going



on that were not relevant to the history of the object. Well, you can call it a reception history. But, in any case, a big battle burst out over the criticism. There is a real conflict, and I'm sure that our cinematographer, if we were in partnership, would have wanted to do things quite differently. But, in effect, he was employed to do it according to our script and accepted the limitation of a very talky film. At the same time, he had a certain freedom in how he shot things, and I would always be happy to listen to his requests to pursue an interest. That could often change what was supposed to be said. But it's definitely a conflict.

One of the filmmakers at the meeting said that he'd been asked by another engaged in the program, "Can you imagine how wonderful it would be without an art historian on your back?" and that met with some approval in the audience. And one of the art historians who, like myself, has been very much involved in film, Leo Steinberg, responded, "What would you say if somebody said to you, 'Can you imagine what it would be like to shoot a film without a cinematographer on your back?'" Because the fact is that whoever it is is going to have an agenda.

GARDNER: Is there a happy middle ground somewhere between videography and rigor?

ACKERMAN: I think so. I think some of the films made by



the center are extremely interesting films. Of course, you don't have to assume that a film about art is going to be used in the classroom. You want it not to make mistakes in what it has to say about what you're looking at.

One of the films with the full approval, if not stimulus, of the art historian is a film without words that investigates the cathedral of Beauvais [Cathedral of Saint Pierce] in a systematic way and tries to show you how the structure works from the piers into the vaults by the sequence of shots rather than by somebody telling you how all these elements go up and then cross the vaults and all that you usually have in a lecture.

GARDNER: It's like a sightseer.

ACKERMAN: Yes. Well, and a very well informed sightseer who knows what to look at. I love that film, and I think that art historians would probably like it too because they can talk while it's going on. [laughter]

GARDNER: That's true. That's true.

ACKERMAN: I think better approaches will be learned. The best examples, I imagine, are the examples where somebody is involved in both writing and filming. One of the co-organizers of the conference is named Judith Wexler. She has made a series for public television called The Painters' World, and she does everything. Well, she



doesn't do the cinematography, but her camera person just comes along and does what she proposes, no doubt with ample input. Not so different from our situation. She solved some of the talking head problem by taking themes that were not didactic, themes like the training of painters, in which she goes into art schools and interviews instructors and students and shows students at work, and that avoids the issue of trying to fit into an art history course, although it could be a supplement to such a course. And she's now started a program to teach the making of art films as a collaborative program between the museum school in Boston [School of the Museum of Fine Arts] and Tufts University (Tufts offers the academic courses for the museum school, anyway). The graduate students in film and in art history take a seminar together.

GARDNER: The other film that I have down that you did was on Frank Stella.

ACKERMAN: Well, I only did that as a producer. The person who had the concept was Caroline Jones, who was associate director of the [Fogg Art] Museum at the time. That was a very successful film. There was an exhibit in the museum of Frank Stella's work, and the film consists of his walking around the show and talking about his early paintings and reliefs. It's a very good format, and I



think it hasn't been done very much. Most films of live painters are shot in the studio. That's a different situation.

GARDNER: Were there other films that you worked on that you didn't list in the Who's Who [in America]?

ACKERMAN: Well, as a producer I worked on virtually all that Harvard made. Then later I became an adviser to "Art of the Western World," which was a mammoth project of BBC [British Broadcasting Corporation] and PBS [Public Broadcasting System] and French television and the Annenberg Foundation. They wanted to produce a history-of-art course in nine hours. I was one of four advisers. But there the constraints were such that the role of the advisers was to keep the producers and directors out of trouble rather than to conceive of very much.

GARDNER: Just to make sure they didn't say anything that wasn't true.

ACKERMAN: Yes. [laughter]



TAPE NUMBER: XII, SIDE TWO

NOVEMBER 18, 1991

GARDNER: You were talking about the conference.

ACKERMAN: I was saying that I thought that filmmakers who hire art historians, which is the reverse of the normal, ought to be funded as well. Because the art historians don't really do beautiful or inventive films; they do useful ones. And the film itself can't be a work of art that way. I think that there should be an opportunity for a film to be art itself. But there's a limit, in my mind, in that the film has to observe the autonomy of the work and not disrupt it. I just was thinking of another film that was shown at the conference of Leonardo da Vinci's drawings of the deluge. There's a whole series in which the earth is overwhelmed with storm and water, and they're very powerful images. In this film, they are made to actually move by computer simulation, taking the image as it is and then rotating parts of the waves so that you get the effect that the storm is actually going on, which is actually less powerful, because it distorts the relationships within the drawing performance. I thought that was a violation of the authenticity of the work, and I am completely opposed to that kind of thing, but I can see a way of approaching works of art by the filmmaker that would enrich the understanding of the work and also create



a thing of beauty.

GARDNER: To move on, back to your writings--and I'm not going to go through all of the things you wrote in the 1970s and 1980s--one book I'd like to ask you about is a book called The Villa: [Form and Ideology of Country Houses (1990)], because it's the one work by James Ackerman that exists on the shelves of the Cherry Hill Public Library. So I assume that that's one of the books that you did that's more broadly distributed than some of the others.

ACKERMAN: Well, Palladio has sold maybe 60,000 copies, while The Villa, to date, after a year and a half, has probably sold 4,500. It's not in paperback yet. Well, it's bound to have a certain breadth of perception because of being broad-based in covering everything from ancient Rome to Le Corbusier and [Frank Lloyd] Wright. And, along the way, the advantage of joint publication in England and America is that there are two or three chapters for each of those countries, so an American library would be interested because it has a chapter on Jefferson and a chapter on the picturesque villa of the early nineteenth century and Frank Lloyd Wright.

GARDNER: What prompted the book?

ACKERMAN: It was started during the Mellon [Foundation] lectureship at the National Gallery of Art.

GARDNER: Okay, good. Well, we can talk, then, about the



Mellon lectureship and how that all came about. Start at the beginning and work our way through to the--

ACKERMAN: That was in 1985. The Mellon lectures are given annually. They select distinguished British and American art historians and other humanists. There is an implied obligation to publish, although the thing has been going for twenty-five years and I don't think there are more than twelve or thirteen books that came out of it. Actually, there were many years before an American-born art historian was named. There was a very definite British bias, though there was also Jacques Maritain. It took a long time before the National Gallery thought that any American was worth it. It involves five or six lectures, public lectures given on a Sunday afternoon--

GARDNER: At the gallery?

ACKERMAN: --at the gallery, and two-thirds of the audience are people who are not professionally interested.

GARDNER: Who are looking for something to do in Washington.

ACKERMAN: Maybe one-third of them just wandered in off the Mall because it was raining or something. [laughter] The lecturer has to think in those terms and to select a nonspecialized subject matter. Since my work on Palladio had been so much involved with villa architecture and I had also been really concerned with this in the



Renaissance villas and always gave a couple of lectures on villas in my course on Renaissance architecture, it was a natural.

It was fierce work getting the lectures done, because I don't think I did more than eight months of preparation, and some of the areas I knew virtually nothing about when I started. Then, after giving the lectures, in order to expand it into a book which has eleven chapters (while there were six lectures), I took on things that I hadn't lectured on, like ancient Roman villas, since they were a source of so many later things. And that required, in each case, maybe half a year of work. It's very difficult to write in a scholarly way where you're covering an enormous expanse of territory. You have to read everything there is to read on that subject. In the case of Roman villas, it's enormous. Also, I don't have a strong background in that field. And third, there was, ultimately, only at the last minute, no book on the subject. I mean, it's not characteristic of people dealing with classical art to write surveys of things. So the five years between the lectures and the publication were completely engaged in doing intensive investigations.

I'd never worked in American architecture, so the chapter about the picturesque villa was a great adventure. It eventuated in my giving a couple of courses on the



subject, but I find the study of American art far inferior in interest to the study of European art--I'm speaking of the nineteenth century. First, because the art itself was not up to the level of the European and is derivative. The picturesque villas were anticipated in England. Then, the kind of concept and ideology that underlies the approach is simplistic. For example, in American landscape painting before the Civil War, which played a major part in the course I gave, the people were really inspired by nationalism and were simpleminded. In dealing with European stuff, I'm accustomed to dealing, for example, with the transformation of Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy through the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, and I think that's more serious and more enriching, because when you want to track down the roots of a Renaissance theoretical idea, you go through some of the major thinkers of the Western tradition.

Anyway, the lectures imposed a kind of a pattern, and then that was expanded. It didn't satisfy me in one sense, that, with this pretension to generality, there were three more chapters that would have had to be written in order to make me happy. But I didn't want to spend four more years doing them. One would be on France. It's interesting in France, because the French never had anything called a villa until the nineteenth century. They had châteaux, and



the bourgeoisie didn't get very much involved in country places before the nineteenth century. Then they built what they called villas. Germany, where I would have done a chapter on [Karl Friedrich] Schinkel alone, whom I love as an architect, and who did a few villa designs that are very interesting. The third would be a comparison of Western to Japanese villas, which would have to have been looser because I don't have the capacity to write original stuff about the Japanese. Well, I don't know about original stuff, because a lot of my work isn't original in the book as it is, and I've been taken apart by a couple of British reviewers who say that I was regurgitating old stuff about the eighteenth-century villa.

GARDNER: Were you?

ACKERMAN: Yes. I think I have some new observations, but there was no way that I was going to be able to add anything to the great wealth of what the British have done. The British are very particularly attracted to their country places, so the writing about that far outstrips anything you would find on urban domestic architecture or churches or anything else. There's just an enormous bibliography, and it's been done by the best people, so that I don't think it does any damage to regurgitate their achievements. There's no way that one could cover two thousand years and be original all the way.

GARDNER: I found it an interesting synthesis when I read it, a guide through all the different types. You mentioned that you didn't much like American architecture of the nineteenth century, but what about the twentieth? You said you talked about Le Corbusier and Wright?

ACKERMAN: Yes. Well, I think American architecture becomes interesting with [H. H.] Richardson, and then there's a kind of a gap. And then, at the end of the century, [Louis] Sullivan and [Charles] McKim and [Stanford] White, and then Wright. Then there's a big gap again until-- I don't know, I don't think you really get first-rate stuff until after the second war.

And in American painting-- Well, this is certainly a bias, but I can't get turned on by any nineteenth-century American painting. Then, really, the first time American painting and sculpture ever impacts the rest of the world is after World War II. Then it becomes central to world art. I think it could be very interesting to work in that field, 1945 to the present, but I'm glad I don't, because it's such a center of theoretical controversy now that the art almost disappears behind the screen of theory.

GARDNER: Let's talk a little about that as long as we're here. I think it might fit into my next question.

ACKERMAN: It's interesting for my autobiography in that I spent many years trying to get my colleagues in art



history to be theoretical and to think about what they were doing and to read theory and philosophy. Then there was an enormous tidal wave of critical theory that hit art history, after a long residence in literary studies, in the seventies. [tape recorder off] So there was now a great shift to critical theory, and I'm now no longer such an enthusiast of theory because it took over and almost obliterated history. Many of the practitioners of the new theory have a scorn for serious historical research and investigation. It is dismissed as being directed by false ideology. Art history went way over on the other extreme. And there's so much political agenda in it, too.

Actually, the professional society of art historians and studio artists [the College Art Association of America] has been taken over by the politically oriented theorists, and we've already had signs that they're likely to undermine the major historical journal which is published by the society [Art Bulletin].

GARDNER: Can you talk a little bit about how the theory undermines the history? Or in what way they don't get along?

ACKERMAN: Let's just take the issue of feminist theory. In the last announcement of the ACLS [American Council of Learned Societies], I think it was, it gave a report on Ph.D.'s offered in the humanities in America, and art



history was the only field in which women predominate. Actually, I think they do in Romance languages, but it just happened that they didn't report on Romance languages separately. And women have been grossly oppressed in all academic fields, particularly in art history because of the proportions, which were always rather high. Not as high as they are now, because in the old days women just quit before they got their degrees because they could see they weren't going to get them. Now, let me backtrack to say that people don't have the capacity to be fully adept at all that's going on in theory. The literature is just overflowing, and you get thick catalogs on theory every month from some place or other. So just keeping up with it is a full-time occupation. But secondly, historical enterprises are associated with the male power hegemony. Furthermore, the opportunity to do feminist studies in fields before the nineteenth century is extremely limited. That is, when you work on the Renaissance and in the Middle Ages, after pointing out how rare it was for women to achieve anything in those times, you've had it. That's almost all you can say: women's lives aren't much documented. You can make studies of women as patrons and that kind of thing, and people are doing that. In fact, I have a male student who is writing quite a traditional thesis in which the subject is a woman patron, and it's



informed by feminist criticism, but it's being done in the usual way with the archival documents and the usual historical investigation. But there are these very strong biases, and the critical movements tend to be led by extremists, as is natural. I mean, anybody who wants to take over and change everything is not going to be very yielding.

Therefore, there are people who call for the destruction of the traditional historical approaches, and then that had the effect of taking an attack on the Art Bulletin, which is the major art historical journal in America. Now, the Art Bulletin isn't something which everyone wants to stand behind completely, because it publishes a lot of pieces out of people's dissertations which are extremely boring and often very inconsequential. But if you didn't have such a journal, then occasional pieces that are important and consequential would have to be sent abroad. It would just be as embarrassing for this country as having the State Department exclude people because of their political views or their health. So it's a difficult time. I'm also quite with the tendency of graduate programs in universities to hire people to teach historical periods who are primarily critical experts. In my view, there are two terrible things that are going to come out of this. One is that the students won't learn



how to do history, and the other is that whatever critical notions are presently in fashion will go out of style and the universities will be stuck for thirty years with professors whose only skill, or primary skill, is in teaching something not done anymore. Yale University became the capital of deconstruction, and the literary people have already turned away from deconstruction, and Yale's primacy of a few years ago has left it in a backwater.

GARDNER: This is a good way of moving into the article I wanted to talk about. I'm all over the place chronologically today, but I think it's worked, anyway. You did an article called "On Judging Art without Absolutes" in 1979 [Critical Inquiry 5: 441-69] that I think discussed a lot of the issues that we've talked about over time, but also things that we talked about over lunch that didn't get on the tapes. Could you talk a little bit about that article?

ACKERMAN: Well, I don't really like that article very much.

GARDNER: Oh. Well, that's interesting, too. Okay.

ACKERMAN: You see, I didn't have any philosophical preparation, and, over the years, I didn't study theory in the way theoreticians do now. So I think that there are procedural weaknesses in everything I've written involving theory. That essay was written in a kind of impressionistic way, that is, in a very personal way. All



of my theory articles are really on the subject of my problems with teaching the survey course. [laughter] I always wanted to teach the survey course in such a way that it was an introduction to art criticism as well as to art history and to raise questions about "Why do we say this is good and why do we say it's better than that?" and so on. Big questions. And inasmuch as I never really adopted an existing philosophical position, all of my statements about aesthetics, critical theories, are just the best that I could do with a pen and pencil and a piece of paper, which isn't the way I think it should go about. I think people should develop their critical approach through a fully articulated philosophy. Well, one of my greatest teachers, Erwin Panofsky, was a neo-Kantian who was very close to the philosopher Ernst Cassirer. That gave a kind of structure to the way he approached things that I feel I never had. Maybe, in some ways, there is a conflict between pursuing history the way I did and having a consistent position. But anyway, while being the advocate of a theoretical grounding, I literally never had it or acquired it, so that, in some sense, I get embarrassed by pieces I've done that deal with criticism. I feel pretty confident about method in historical issues, such as the essay I wrote many, many years ago on style ["A Theory of Style." Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 20 (1969):



227-37]. That didn't engage with these difficult issues of quality, which can only be resolved, essentially, on the grounds of some overall philosophical stance.

"Art without Absolutes" is something that took pretty much the same position as Nelson Goodman did in Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols, and in Ways of Worldmaking. Because he is a philosopher, and he gave a philosophical vocabulary to a position of relativity in the judgment of works of art. The issue is raised by the situation in art itself. [tape recorder off] I must have said this over again in these dialogues, how attempting to explain what was going on in art after 1960 required a lot of shifting around of attitude to anybody who was addressing judging art to students, because all the principles had been disrupted by practice. In the other article, "Interpretation, Response: [Toward a Theory of Art Criticism." In Theories of Criticism With M.H. Abrams (1984)], which was later, I articulated that, and I like that article better than the "Judging Art without Absolutes."

GARDNER: Is that the response to Nelson Goodman, that one in a review of [Ways of Worldmaking]?

ACKERMAN: No, "Interpretation, Response" was a little pamphlet for the Library of Congress. That's the theoretical piece which I have the most confidence in, but I still think that it would have been better if I had a



firm philosophical grounding.

GARDNER: What's better about "Interpretation, Response"?

ACKERMAN: It doesn't get involved in kind of woozy statements that aren't given a full philosophical grounding, and it says more clearly what the problem is in relation to contemporary art.

GARDNER: One of the interesting things in "On Judging Art without Absolutes" was your notion that the-- I guess what you call the idealist period. Was that it?

ACKERMAN: Yeah.

GARDNER: That it ended in 1960, and that's something you talked about. Do you still hold to that? That the break from the idealist tradition comes after abstract expressionism?

ACKERMAN: Well, actually, this has been beautifully articulated since I wrote that by Arthur Danto in a book called The Transformation of the Commonplace. I've since become friends with him, and we've talked about many things. He's the art critic for the Nation. He's a philosopher, and he got engaged in art just at the moment when idealism petered out. He saw an extraordinary paradox emerging with the work of Andy Warhol and everything after. And now, really, he does interesting criticism, really seeing art as a branch of philosophy. He's not a visual critic. He doesn't have a great interest in the quality of



works of art, but he sees them as philosophical statements. But that shift is really confirmed by what he has to say.

In a sense, I think it ought to be amended by a stronger nod to Marcel Duchamp, for whom idealism had already stopped in the 1920s. But Duchamp was all alone in the world up to and through the fifties, and people only realized how important he was after. And he was important in exactly the way Warhol was. [tape recorder off]

But the idea about the idealist thing going through the fifties, I like that idea, and I don't think it took particularly, because what I wrote wasn't really very much read. If anybody asked me for reading on such a subject, I would turn them to Goodman and Danto rather than myself. GARDNER: Tell me about your written dialogue with Nelson Goodman ["Notes and Exchanges." Critical Inquiry 5 (1979): 795-99] on "World Making and Practical Criticism" [Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 39 (1979): 249-54], I think it was. How did that come about?

ACKERMAN: Well, I think that was in Critical Inquiry, and Critical Inquiry was trying to set up dialogues like that. In fact, it's a regular feature of each issue of the journal, because they wanted to have a focus of interchange. I've always been on the editorial board of Critical Inquiry, which is why they returned to me. But it's kind of-- As a matter of fact, one of my pieces that I published



there stimulated a dialogue with [Ernst] Gombrich and Quentin Bell, the nephew of Virginia Woolf. Anyway, Nelson has been used by art historians quite a bit. Prior to Danto's work in art, he was the only philosopher whose writing was of interest to people in the history of art, as Stanley Cavell was for the history of film. So I was really dealing with the issue of how Ways of Worldmaking helps articulate a problem of art history and art criticism, and I think we were pretty much in harmony then. He may have disagreed with me on minor points.

GARDNER: Mostly in agreement.

Well, let's start talking now about the book [Distance Points: Essays in Theory and Renaissance Art and Architecture (1991)]. When I picked it up out of the envelope, I was startled by its size. Even though I knew you had so many articles, I was. Heft, I guess, would be the proper word. [laughter] Can you talk about how that came about?

ACKERMAN: Yes. It was related to the planning of a big party which my former Ph.D. students gave me for my seventieth birthday. The committee that organized the party also came up with the idea that a good way to celebrate the occasion would be, well, a dual approach. One would be to encourage a university press to publish collected studies, and the other would be for them to present me articles, not in the form of a printed volume, but with each publishing in whatever writing an article dedicated to me. So I have,

in the other room, four volumes of these articles, some in manuscripts, because they hadn't been published.

Well, it turned out that I had something like sixty-two doctoral students. This large number was, in part, because I was always willing to take on people who were doing things that weren't in anybody's field, like photography or cinema. And I think I had warm relationships with most of the students who worked with me. I wasn't as personally involved, in many cases, as I had been with my professor, [Richard] Krautheimer, because Krautheimer had no children, and he and his wife [Trude Krautheimer-Hess] both enjoyed having his students really participate in their lives to some degree. He taught at Vassar [College] when I first worked with him. He did graduate courses at NYU [New York University], but he was Vassar faculty, so I would go spend the weekend in Poughkeepsie with him when I had something to discuss. I never really brought students into the family life, but I was always very attentive, and I always, unlike some of my colleagues, would read their stuff as soon as they handed it in and would take care with commenting on it. So they're, on the whole, a very loyal bunch.

One, David Friedman, is a professor at MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology], and he got the MIT Press interested [in publishing Ackerman's collected

1. The first part of the paper discusses the importance of the study of the history of the United States. It is argued that a knowledge of the past is essential for a full understanding of the present and for the development of a sound policy for the future. The author points out that the study of history is not only a means of satisfying a natural curiosity about the past, but also a means of training the mind in the habits of logical and critical thinking.

2. The second part of the paper is devoted to a discussion of the various methods which have been employed by historians in the study of the past. It is shown that the methods of the historians have changed from time to time, and that the methods of the present are the result of a long and continuous process of development. The author points out that the methods of the historians are not only a means of satisfying a natural curiosity about the past, but also a means of training the mind in the habits of logical and critical thinking.

3. The third part of the paper is devoted to a discussion of the various sources of historical information. It is shown that the sources of historical information are not only a means of satisfying a natural curiosity about the past, but also a means of training the mind in the habits of logical and critical thinking. The author points out that the sources of historical information are not only a means of satisfying a natural curiosity about the past, but also a means of training the mind in the habits of logical and critical thinking.

4. The fourth part of the paper is devoted to a discussion of the various problems which have been encountered by historians in the study of the past. It is shown that the problems of the historians are not only a means of satisfying a natural curiosity about the past, but also a means of training the mind in the habits of logical and critical thinking. The author points out that the problems of the historians are not only a means of satisfying a natural curiosity about the past, but also a means of training the mind in the habits of logical and critical thinking.

5. The fifth part of the paper is devoted to a discussion of the various contributions which have been made by historians to the study of the past. It is shown that the contributions of the historians are not only a means of satisfying a natural curiosity about the past, but also a means of training the mind in the habits of logical and critical thinking. The author points out that the contributions of the historians are not only a means of satisfying a natural curiosity about the past, but also a means of training the mind in the habits of logical and critical thinking.

essays]. And a committee, rather than I, chose the work. I didn't choose. I might have made some different choices if I'd done it, but I'm not sure that my judgment is better than that of somebody who is unengaged with it. So I was happy with it. And then that book took quite a lot of work, because I undertook to do a postscript for every article, musing on how each one looked from the perspective of today. And given that the first article is from 1948, there was lots of literature that I had to cover to bring it up to date. So I really owe it to this group of my ex-students.

A fairly large proportion of people teaching Renaissance and baroque architecture in this country were my students. Probably 85 percent of all teachers in this field were prepared by myself and David [R.] Coffin at Princeton [University], and most of the rest by Henry Millon at MIT.



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GARDNER: I had just asked you if Harvard [University Press] was envious that your book [Distance Points: Essays in Theory and Renaissance Art and Architecture (1991)] had gone on up the road.

ACKERMAN: Harvard has no interest at all in art, and it's galled me over the years. But I wouldn't have given them a book at any time even if they'd begged because they don't know how to reach the public in this field.

GARDNER: That's very interesting. And MIT [Press] does better.

ACKERMAN: MIT is the leading press in the history of architecture and in contemporary architecture in the whole world. In fact, I just wrote a letter to the American Institute of Architects supporting a citation of the architectural editor at MIT [Roger Conover] for his exceptional work in publishing in the field of architecture.

GARDNER: I have two questions that are going to come out of this, and I don't know which to ask first. I'll stick to the book. What was your reaction to this? You were reading over virtually almost a half century, forty-two years' worth, of writings. Were you knocked off your chair when you first saw this?

ACKERMAN: For the most part, I was satisfied with the work.

THE HISTORY OF THE
CITY OF BOSTON

FROM THE FIRST SETTLEMENT
TO THE PRESENT TIME
BY
JOSEPH NEALE
OF THE BOSTON BAR
IN TWO VOLUMES
VOL. II.
BOSTON: PUBLISHED BY
J. NEALE, AT THE SIGN OF THE
CROWN, IN CORNHILL.
1825.

And in the case of the 1962 article on style-- This is funny. I say in the postscript that it's completely obsolete--people don't think that way anymore--but still I thought it was a terrific piece of work. I thought it was beautifully written and that it really just knocked nails on the head all the way through.

One of the things that I'd noticed in doing the postscript is that in that year, 1962, three pieces of work came out, all of them with the same message: one of them, perhaps one of the ten most famous books of the century, Tom [Thomas S.] Kuhn's The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, and the other one a book by George Kubler called The Shape of Time. The three of us injected into historical study something which hadn't been said before, and it all happened independently, no relationship at all at that moment. That was the idea that a significant innovation generates an entire train of operations that exploit its potential. In the history of art, it's the coming of a new form, as when Giotto introduced a new vocabulary, and then for centuries others operate on its principles. Each successive contribution expands or alters the path, but there's a generating thing at the start. That's the same as Kuhn's position. Kubler speaks about a prime object and a series that follows it. It's fascinating. And none of us, although we all knew each other,



ever talked this over. Kubler had been one of my teachers as an undergrad, but he hadn't developed that theory yet.

Well, the early 1960s was a wonderful period of ferment in the humanities. All over, there were conferences being done bringing people together from different fields that just sparked a whole mass of creative work. Systems theory was a factor in this, the concept of things kind of working out across disciplines contemporaneously, and, of course, there's a parallel in French historical theory that differentiates synchronic from diachronic study. But it was wonderful. I went to a number of conferences in the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and elsewhere of an interdisciplinary sort that just really set me afire.

Well, I was surprised going back-- I knew that style of article was going to look funny, because we don't do art history in terms of style much anymore, and I was very pleasantly surprised that something which I saw as being no longer useful could still be so pleasurable. [laughter]

GARDNER: Any others in there that struck you particularly?

ACKERMAN: Well, I still like the way "Interpretation, Response" was presented. And I think that those articles in the historical field were good. As a young man I had more energy for being thorough. For example, the one

THE HISTORY OF THE
CITY OF BOSTON
FROM THE FIRST SETTLEMENT
TO THE PRESENT TIME
IN TWO VOLUMES
BY NATHANIEL BENTLEY
OF THE BARR

THE FIRST VOLUME
CONTAINING THE HISTORY
FROM THE FIRST SETTLEMENT
TO THE YEAR 1780
IN TWO VOLUMES
BY NATHANIEL BENTLEY
OF THE BARR

THE SECOND VOLUME
CONTAINING THE HISTORY
FROM THE YEAR 1780
TO THE PRESENT TIME
IN TWO VOLUMES
BY NATHANIEL BENTLEY
OF THE BARR

about the Vatican Palace, which was part of my dissertation, was really very nicely wrapped up. A much later article that represents my more relaxed attitude towards thoroughness, the one about the Tuscan order in architecture, it has a good idea in it that's really basic, and I wrote it in a fairly short time. What's so different from my earlier work is that-- In order to discuss how the Renaissance developed this idea of a Tuscan order, I went back to antiquity to its original usage, and I cited some examples. In my earlier days, I would have made it a point to find all the examples. But now I thought, "That doesn't have anything to do with the concept."

Well, all through my career as a "scientific" historian, I have seen my German colleagues at the Hertziana [Library] in Rome looking over my shoulders and scorning me for not knowing this or that detail, because these people are all fabulously knowledgeable about every stone and every drawing and whatever went on in Rome in the Renaissance. And I had been pursuing this subject from America, never with the opportunity to be that thorough. In a way, there had been a running battle, because the chief of this group [Christof Frommels] has written books which I have reviewed and criticized for lacking a broad view. [laughter] I always visualize these people reading my things and know what their reaction will be, so



my feeling about my work is affected by this even though I don't want to be like they are.

Also, I would say that I've been successful because of my sense of how people listen to what I say. I wouldn't attribute it to insecurity. I would attribute it to an acquired sense of my unimportance. I never got rid of the feeling that I didn't matter. Because of this, everything I do takes account of what somebody else will think about it. That helps a person to reach an audience. I've never had impenetrable prose, nor have I made the exposition of ideas too difficult. Well, there's one article in there where the subject matter is so difficult that I think most people wouldn't bother to follow it, but--

GARDNER: Which one is that?

ACKERMAN: It's called "Leonardo's Eye." It has to do with his theory of optics and his anatomy of the eye. To a nonspecialist in the field, it probably isn't worth the trouble to follow what's being said. But I think that's because if you're going to take that subject, there's no way to avoid it being difficult. Well, that interface between personality development and address is interesting.

GARDNER: Yes, a vital part of it. One of the questions that comes out of this discussion and I think backs up



into other things that we've discussed, especially given your comment about Harvard--I had a note on this, and we didn't get into it last time--is the role of publishers in the field and the influence of publishers on the field of art history. As someone who is not an art historian, I walk into a bookstore and I'm overwhelmed by big, glossy [Harry N.] Abrams [Inc.] books. On the other hand, the bulk of publishing by art historians doesn't make it into those. Could you talk a little bit about that, about publishers and art history?

ACKERMAN: Well, for one thing, if you publish a scholarly book, you don't make money. A lot of people are concerned about income and if tempted by Harry Abrams would do things in art to assist him. One of my graduate school associates, Fred Hart, died two weeks ago, three weeks ago. Fred was a very talented and imaginative art historian who was practically a house author at Abrams, and I just think it was because he was greedy. And I'm sorry, because if he'd have done some of these things as a scholar rather than as a popularizer, I think he would have contributed a lot more. In fact, the greedy theory was confirmed by the fact that he died virtually in disgrace because he had attributed a statuette to Michelangelo as a sketch for Michelangelo's David, which he then got involved in marketing. He apparently made an

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agreement with a rather shady dealer that he would get a cut if the piece was sold. And that eagerness for the income put him in disgrace in the profession. I was sorry to see that in an obituary of such a talented person, one mistake became the main theme.

GARDNER: Oh, that is too bad.

ACKERMAN: But he was a rather bizarre person. It's true that these glossy publishers--and there are several Italian ones now--tempt people from doing their most reliable work. And also the fact that a lot of art books by university presses don't get distributed very effectively. They have editions of a thousand or so. So that's the problem now. I haven't heard of a lot of people not being able to find a publisher--that's a very rare situation.

In fact, my kind of career seems to be something of the past. That is to say, by the time I came to Harvard, I had two major books and half a dozen articles or so at the age of forty, and I don't see many forty-year-olds today who do that. I've spoken of the reasons for this before. I think a different family life is a very important factor. The whole scheme is different. But the fact is that when departments are appointing people at tenure level today, it's rather shocking how little they have to go on.



GARDNER: The last thing I want to ask you about-- Well, the next to last thing; I'll have a more general question afterwards. You got a doctorate in architecture from the University of Venice in 1985. Could you talk about that? That must have been quite an honor.

ACKERMAN: It involved a certain amount of collusion, because I have three friends who teach there, and although we're not intimates, they're people I always see when I go to Italy. They teach in a huge program of architectural history which has hundreds of students and dozens of instructors. One of these people, Manfredo Tafuri, who I think is the most important architectural historian of these times, is the head of the program. I think he wanted the architecture school to recognize a historian because that would emphasize the status of history, and it was essential that it not be an Italian, because, within Italy, any choice like that is wildly influenced by politics and dealings. So they had to find a foreigner dealing with Italian architecture. That really made it come down to a German or an American, so the field wasn't infinitely large. And I was a good friend. So that's how I think it happened. But the enormous honor is that the two former recipients of this degree were Frank Lloyd Wright and Louis Kahn.

GARDNER: Not bad company. [laughter]



ACKERMAN: There were, actually, an Italian and a German architect who were honored at the same ceremony. But I thought it was a pretty big deal.

GARDNER: I suspect so. In mentioning the fact that these were architectural historians, it inspires me to ask you: Earlier on, we talked about the nature of art historians and the way art historians are responding to the modern era with theory over history. Is the same thing happening in the history of architecture? Or is that a different world?

ACKERMAN: It's quite different. There is little impact of feminism, partly because, in the same way that women are steered away from physics or other technical and scientific fields, they have been discouraged from architectural history. Not from architecture; they're quite well represented in the architecture school. But in the architectural profession, they are not. The second thing is that the history of painting and sculpture is filled with the exploitation of females: the nude and the nineteenth-century painters and [Willem] de Kooning and other contemporaries like [David] Salle.

In the history of painting, it took a long time for neo-Marxist attitudes to seep in. And in architecture, they came in very naturally, because architecture is so interlaced with the social conditions that it came rather



early. My friend Tafuri was a leading exponent of that. He was in the Communist Party. I think it's this grounding in the utilitarian that withholds it from a really major onslaught.

Another very important thing in figural art has been Lacanian theory and the idea of the gaze and how the viewer looks and how the people in the painting look at each other and all that. Architecture is not susceptible. There is a certain effort to apply semiotic theory to architecture, which tends to work in a limited sort of way, where there's something that you can call an architectural vocabulary.

Theory was absorbed in an effective way in architectural history. But it might be that the leaders of critical movements today regard all of architectural history as being somewhat backward. But whereas new students who come in to do nineteenth- or twentieth-century painting will already be anxious to get involved in theoretical positions, those who come in for architectural history will not. They'll keep up to the extent that's necessary for maintaining their standing with their fellow students. The themes that they've been choosing since I left haven't altered. One of the ones who has asked me to give a hand, who's not working with me, is doing sixteenth-century city planning in Turin, and another one is doing the villas of Palermo. Those are the



kinds of things they would have done fifteen years ago, too.

GARDNER: That's very interesting.

ACKERMAN: Well-- Oh, finally, I want to say a word about what I'm doing now.

GARDNER: That was what I was going to ask you next, anyway. What a happy coincidence.

ACKERMAN: I applied for a Guggenheim [Fellowship] to do a book on classicism, and I don't know exactly how to define the subject. I called it "The Origins of Classicism" in a lecture I gave last week at Princeton [University], but the point of my lecture was that the whole art of the Renaissance should not be called classic and the origins of classicism come later. My focus was on what is it if it's not classic and my effort to see what Renaissance architects and painters and sculptors believed that they were doing and to demonstrate that there was no idea of the classic at that time.

The first art historian, Vasari, called the early sixteenth century, the time of Leonardo and Raphael and Michelangelo, the culmination of art, and then it was later called classic. But what Vasari meant by "the culmination" is not what later people meant when they said "classical." Of course, it's classical in the sense that it involves the reexamination of ancient art, which is also called classical art, so that there's a verbal



confusion there. That much is classical. But other things that became defined as classical in the seventeenth century, having to do with modes of composition and organization, the emphasis of axis, the buildup of parts to the center, symmetry, and so on, were not the goals of Renaissance artists.

Well, the thesis is that, after all, it's just a word, and it doesn't matter a lot what you call things, but the word, as we use it, has always caused us to look at the Renaissance through classical-colored glasses. And my effort will be to say, "Let's look at the Renaissance, as far as possible, the way the Renaissance looked at the Renaissance, and let's forget about this accumulation." I recognize, of course, that one never forgets about one's own time, that one is deeply engaged in it, and I'm only able to say this because of all the upheaval in vision that has followed. The end of idealism in recent decades has altered my critical apparatus so that the one that defines classicism has, for me, come into question. So the book will be engaged with the attempt, first, to define, to the extent that it's possible with our differently colored glasses on, how the people of this age saw the age, and secondly, then, to trace how the concept of classicism that we have inherited was formulated in the seventeenth century. I'm quite excited about this.



I'm really delighted with this kind of work. The reading of the critical texts, that's part of it. Another part is to attempt to trace critical vocabulary and heritage from ancient writers, primarily of rhetoric. Another thing will be the examination of the drawings rather than finished works, because I see drawings as a way of investigating the steps that people take in realizing a work. For example, if you follow the definitions of classicism and the effects of classicism, a drawing tends to be made, as it is in later times, by blocking out a rectangular composition. He tends to start off with the rectangle and then to organize within it. Whereas in the Renaissance, with a few exceptions, everything is an accumulation of parts, and the whole is the sum of the parts. All theoretical statements made prior to and through Vasari define the act of composing as being putting parts together into a harmonious whole, which is simply the inverse of the classical system. Well, it's through the text that you get the principles, but the drawings will help to illustrate. And then I like the idea of being able to spend the time with the drawings, too, because it's prime material.

And, on the other hand, this is well suited to my present situation, in which it's unlikely, because of family reasons, that I will be, if I get a grant, using it



to go abroad for a year and settle down. It's just impractical. I can do this work here. When I get to the drawing stage, I'll need some forays, perhaps, but I really think it's a good arrangement, and it's not why I came to this.

Also, an aspect of this study is that it would investigate the origins of art history--I gave a talk on that last summer--which is part of the classical study. The contention is that criticism has to precede history, because history is based on the ability to identify something that evolves in time, and the ancients didn't develop this in the art field. The ancients implied that what happened in history was that artists got closer and closer to imitating nature. And this was certainly not an effective way of giving a structure to a historical attitude. It forced everything into a mold that didn't work. [tape recorder off]

GARDNER: You retired from teaching in 1990, I guess, right?

ACKERMAN: Yes, but I taught last year at Columbia [University], so it was a kind of continuation.

GARDNER: Do you hope to continue to do that?

ACKERMAN: No. The only thing I want to do is, if anybody gives the chance, to do graduate seminars on my work, because it's great to try ideas out and to have feedback.



And I think that students would be excited by this project, too, particularly if instead of telling them what it was they had to study, I would say, "Look. I'm writing this book on classicism, and I had these questions about what it meant to cast the concept back onto the Renaissance. What would you do in this case?" And then let them go. I might learn a lot that way. And also, students love being given responsibility and not being dominated by the idea-- Even though the professor may have ideas that have never been published and are completely new and will be exciting to read, the student still likes to feel that he is carrying the ball. And that's the kind of graduate teaching which I've always been happiest with. I offered this course at NYU [New York University] with Kathleen [Weil-Garris] Brandt in 1992.

GARDNER: Does Harvard not have even provisions for--?

ACKERMAN: Only an extension.

GARDNER: They don't have an emeritus program where--?

ACKERMAN: No, they decidedly don't want it. Well, of course, they have only two more years to follow their principles, because they'll be mandated by Congress to not retire people for age any longer. And I think a lot of Harvard humanities faculty would elect that option I'm speaking of. The poor scientists get thrown out of their labs and they can't do anything.



GARDNER: Well, it was the classical university model, or it used to be, to have the retired professors around for an occasional seminar, wasn't it? Twenty or twenty-five years ago?

ACKERMAN: Well, if Harvard thinks that it can call on such an endless pool of talent, they don't need these old coots-- [laughter] Well, I already had a letter a couple of weeks ago asking me if I'd do a summer thing for the architecture school, and then extension would like to have a course. I think it would be a nice contrast to work in extension, because it's not so elitist. On the other hand, students can't be expected to read anything but English, so doing this kind of investigation is somewhat hampered by that. But I've really gotten onto a very different pace. I only do a few hours a day. While Jill Slosburg-[Ackerman] is teaching, I pick Jesse [A. Ackerman] up at day-care at three o'clock, and if he doesn't have a nap after that, I don't get to work again from three to nine thirty P.M. And I'm slowly learning not to get itchy about it. [laughter]

GARDNER: It sounds like you might even enjoy it.

ACKERMAN: Well, I do enjoy it. It's always possible to be itchy and enjoy something.

GARDNER: Well, I think I'm at the end of my list. Do you have anything you'd like to add?



ACKERMAN: I don't really think so. I want my scholarly career to follow that of my mentor, [Richard] Krautheimer, who's ninety-four and publishing and excavating, and it's just wonderful.

GARDNER: So we still have another quarter century of your work. [laughter] That's good. Good. Well, thank you very much.

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